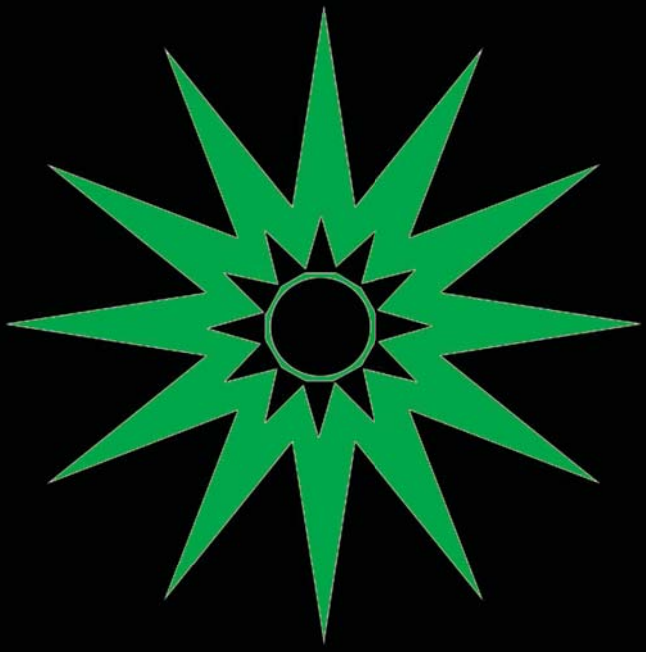
The Black Sun by Tashi Lhunpo



Russell McCloud

BERSERKER
BOOKS

> Jerusalem, long ago

"After the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took
They took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic, which was woven in one piece from top to bottom, with no seams. They said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see to whom it belongs.' This was to fulfil the Scripture: 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my tunic.' And the soldiers did this.

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus
mother and, beside her, the disciple whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that everything had now been accomplished, he said, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled: 'I am thirsty.' A jar of vinegar was standing there. They put a sponge soaked in vinegar on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had taken the vinegar, he said, 'It is finished!'

And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the Preparation Day and the bodies were not to remain on the cross during the Sabbath, the Jews asked Pilate that the legs of those crucified might be broken and their bodies then taken down; for this Sabbath was a high day.

So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man, and then of the other who had been crucified with him.

But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs; instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water flowed out.

And the one who saw this has testified, and his testimony is true. And he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you too may believe. For this happened so that the Scripture might be fulfilled: 'Not a bone of him shall be broken

. And another Scripture says: ‘They will look upon him whom they have pierced.’

(Gospel of John 19:23–37)

3

> Vienna, 14 March 1938

He had returned home, home to that city he had left almost 25 years ago. He had never liked it; no, he had even hated it. And yet he had once spent almost six years here, a time he later described as ‘the hardest, if also the most thorough, school’ of his life, a time in which he had let himself drift and which had driven him.

It had been bitterly cold. People’s breath had formed little clouds of mist. Their coat collars had been turned up, their hands buried deep in their pockets. The rain, which had been falling for hours from the dark clouds in the sky, had been mixed with snow. A biting wind had swept through the streets, where people had walked faster than usual. Was it down to the weather, or simply the figures standing in the queue outside the homeless shelter, shifting from one foot to the other to ward off the cold? He, too, had been in the queue. He had felt hatred, hatred for the people whose gaze had turned away the moment it met the emaciated figures. He felt both rejected by and drawn to bourgeois society. Yet the more he had felt the rejection, the stronger his urge had become to be part of that society.

Years later, the consequences of this would become apparent: he would defend an order that he simultaneously rejected. And so, by making the cause of the rejecters his own, he, the rejected one,

, he would attempt to seemingly overturn the humiliation he had suffered. He would articulate his accusations of guilt against the world in order to explain his own fate through its flawed order.

Back then, when he had stood in the long queue outside the homeless shelter to get a bowl of soup, amidst the flotsam
flotsam of the big city, back then he had been far from it. It was November 1909. Yet by 24 May 1913, when he turned his back on the city, he would have acquired what one of his biographers would later describe as the ‘granite foundation’, though, of course, without really realising just how apt that description was.

Now, as the events of that time flashed before his mind’s eye, he stood once more where he had first stood in 1910. He had been here dozens of times by 1913, yet never had he enjoyed the privilege of being alone, alone with the spear of fate, alone with history.

Today, his companions had granted his wish. More than half an hour had already passed since they had closed the door behind them. Now he was lost in thought, giving the impression of a
meditator engaged in dialogue with his God. His head was stretched forward, his piercing gaze fixed on the spear lying spread out before him on red velvet.

Suddenly his upper body began to tremble, at first very slightly, then with increasing intensity. Eventually his hands, his head and his legs were seized by it. Beads of sweat formed on his face, leaving salty trails on his skin as they trickled down and
hairs of his narrow moustache. The trembling turned into a full-blown shiver, yet his gaze remained fixed on the tip of the spear. But the trance that overtook him, seizing his mind, left his senses unable to perceive anything.

His mouth opened and a scream burst forth, which was nothing
There was something human about him. His arms shot forward, seized the spear, and flung it into the air. His head jerked upwards, his dark

eyes fixed on the piece of history he held in his outstretched, trembling hands. His uniform cap slipped down and fell to the floor. A strand of his hair hung over his
sweat-drenched forehead.

He had become one with the magical powers radiating from the spear, whose aura transferred to him, filled him and produced a sense of elation such as he had never experienced before. Four times seven years – 28 in total – he had waited for this moment. Now, on the night of
14th to the 15th of March 1938, he finally held the spear in his hands. He had become one with destiny; indeed, he was destiny itself. His cry ebbed away, fading into a

a rattle; his upper body fell forward and crashed onto the small table. His fingers clenched the piece of metal as if swearing never to let it go again.

He had entered the city just a few hours earlier. What he had left quietly and secretly in 1913, he now reclaimed in triumph. Enthusiastic crowds, seas of flowers, a forest of flags, thunderous cheers, blaring fanfares, festooned houses – all for him, the once-outcast.

When the German troops had marched in, the Austrian President had given the order to seal off Vienna's city centre hermetically and, above all, to secure the government buildings around the Hofburg. But when the police units arrived there, they encountered armed SS squads. Ernst Kaltenbrunner himself had overseen the handover of the keys to the treasury, for that room was more important than all the government buildings put together, more important than anything else. It was *the* ultimate *target*. It was not for nothing that the occupation of the Hofburg had been given the highest priority and the coup had been planned with military precision.

Hitler stepped out of the treasury through the door. Outside, Wolfram von Sievers, Major Walter Buch, Ernst Kaltenbrunner and Heinrich Himmler were waiting. More than an hour had passed since they had left him there alone. Yet that single hour had been enough to change something within him. The master of Germany had become a contender for the Earth's challenge cup.

In 1932, he had said to Hermann Rauschning: "We shall rouse the world from its slumber. We shall set ourselves tasks that the world of today cannot even dream of. Germany is always just a beginning. Whoever conquers it will leave their mark on the next age."

Now he was certain: no one would be able to stop him.

5

> Nuremberg, 30 April 1945

"Information received so far suggests that the order to take the imperial regalia to a secure location came from Himmler. Apart from Himmler and the Nuremberg city officials entrusted with the transport, only Kaltenbrunner, the head of the German Security Service, and Müller, the head of the Gestapo, have been informed of the insignia's actual whereabouts. At a meeting of department heads at the Reich Security Main Office, which took place on 1 April in Berlin—that is, one day after the insignia were collected—Müller reported to Kaltenbrunner: 'The imperial insignia have been sunk in a lake by reliable agents.'

Kaltenbrunner's only reply was: 'Good!' This information was provided by Oberführer Spacil, who, as head of Department II of the Reich Security Main Office, was obliged to attend the meeting. Spacil concluded from this exchange that Kaltenbrunner was aware of the

He must have been aware of the details of the operation, as he would otherwise have enquired about the specific circumstances. From Müller's remark, on the other hand, it can also be concluded that the idea of covering up the traces by inventing a story about the insignia being sunk in a lake must have originated in the highest echelons of the German
Security Police, and that the order to stage a
staged transport of the treasures in Nuremberg came from Berlin. The fact that not even the heads of the
Reich Security Main Office were deemed worthy of being let in on the secret proves the political significance attached to it.

Based on these facts and in accordance with conversations between captured SS members, as reported by the Third Army's intelligence headquarters, it appears that, according to the German security service's plans, the imperial regalia were to become the symbol of the future German resistance movement."

(From the archives of the US Intelligence Service: "Report on Recovery of Imperial German Insignia of the Holy Roman Empire", MGO, Detachment E-203, Company

C, 3rd Military Government Regiment, AP 403, USA.)

6

The jeep bumped over the rubble scattered across the road. The driver did his best to avoid it. The American
artillery and the bombers had done a thorough job. Destruction as far as the eye could see. The last German resistance had collapsed in the steel storms of thousands of tonnes of explosives.

Captain Walter Thompson ordered the driver to stop. As he got out, he left his rifle in the car. A few hours earlier, his men had discovered something in a narrow alley in Nuremberg that he now wanted to take a closer look at. Beneath a pile of rubble and debris, an entrance to a tunnel had appeared. Thompson walked towards it. Two GIs stationed in front of it reported.

“It’s an old cellar vault, sir. There’s no light in there. But we’ve already organised some torches.”

The soldier, a sergeant, chewed his gum, clearly unimpressed by Thompson’s higher rank. Grinning, he held up two torches.

"Right, Sergeant. You're coming with me."

Thompson took a torch and lit it with his storm lighter. He led the way, the sergeant following behind him. For the first few metres, they had to climb over the remains of the masonry that had once formed the house above the cellar, but then it became easier.

The light of the torches cast a ghostly glow on the walls of the vault. Ancient, thought Thompson.

After a few metres, he realised that the walls were no longer made of brick. The passage had now been hewn directly into the rock.

The sergeant was close behind him. Suddenly he swore loudly.

“What’s the matter, Sergeant?”

Thompson turned around.

“Nothing, sir. I just banged my head on this bloody rock. It’s pretty tight in here.”

“Did you actually have the passage checked for mines and booby traps beforehand? Otherwise, it could get a lot more unpleasant in here.”

“Yes, of course. We’ve cleared away whatever we found. And if there’s anything else there, you’ll be the first to step on it...”

Thompson was now far too agitated to reprimand the sergeant. Would he actually find what he was hoping for here?

Months ago, long before the first US soldier had even set foot on German soil, Thompson had been assigned to the task and placed in charge of a special unit formed specifically for this purpose.

The further the American troops had advanced, the more information had come his way. He had spent the last few weeks searching only for supposed hiding places of the Habsburg regalia – without success.

But here, in Nuremberg, the ground was hot. For long enough had the spear been kept in this city, which had once served as the backdrop for the NSDAP’s
NSDAP Reich Party Congresses, had kept the spear. So why, Thompson wondered, shouldn’t it still be here?

There! The light of the torches revealed the remains of a massive steel door in the darkness. Soldiers had blown it open. It had to be behind it! Thompson no longer paid any attention to the man behind him. He wanted to know, now! He hurried forward, making his way over the rubble scattered everywhere. Then he had passed the steel door.

Behind them was a whole row of wooden crates, apparently left there in a great hurry in a jumble that was uncharacteristic of the Germans.

“Come on, man, hold this!”

Thompson handed the sergeant his torch. At the same time, he drew his combat knife from its sheath.

He set about the crates, opening one after the other. All contained priceless works of art, looted from every corner of Europe. In any other situation, Thompson would have taken his time to examine them, but with every new crate he opened and

which failed to yield the contents he sought, his feverish excitement only grew. The sergeant looked on in bewilderment at the captain working frantically away.

Then, with the thirteenth crate, he finally found what he was looking for. Relief washed over him. He had what he wanted; for him, the war was over—at least his own.

Sometimes the temporal coincidence of events is astonishing, even—or perhaps especially—when they take place hundreds of kilometres apart. A thread seems to link both—

To bind them, to link them, to make them part of a shared whole. If you pull on one end of the thread, something moves at the other. Yet it is often not a straight line that connects two things. The thread veers off course, twists and turns, and becomes knotted.

And only a few people are able to untie these knots.

Hitler had had lunch at 2 pm, in the depths of the Führer's Berlin bunker, surrounded by his secretaries and his cook. Whilst he was eating his last meal, two Soviet soldiers hoisted the Red Flag on the dome of the Reichstag building. After the meal, Hitler summoned his closest associates. He shook hands with Goebbels, Bormann, Generals Burgdorf and Krebs, his secretaries – Mrs Jung and Mrs Christian – and a few orderlies.
He then retired to his room with his long-time companion Eva Braun, whom he had married shortly before.

The clock showed 3.30 pm. At the very moment that Captain Walter Thompson opened the thirteenth crate in a Nuremberg cellar, a shot rang out in the Führer's Berlin bunker. Adolf Hitler was dead; his wife had taken poison.

Whilst in Nuremberg a few GIs struggled to haul the crates out of the cellar, in Berlin the SS guards carried the bodies of Hitler and Eva Braun up into the courtyard. They were doused with petrol, and Hitler's adjutant, Otto Günsche, threw a burning rag onto the bodies.

Hitler had been in possession of the spear for seven years. The man who had once queued for a bowl of hot soup in Vienna, among the urban flotsam, had become the master of Germany and, ultimately, of the whole of Europe. At its zenith, his power had stretched from the icy North Cape to the scorching deserts of North Africa, from the waves of the
Atlantic to the endless expanse of Russia.

If anyone were to come along and say that Hitler's path had begun in 1910 in the Vienna Treasury, they would be declared mad. Yet the wise men would look at one another and smile knowingly. There were no coincidences, at most things that ordinary people explained with ordinary reasons.

Now the flames consumed the flesh of that man who had become a symbol of ice-cold annihilation. Fire and ice, in the eternal play of magical forces. It seemed as though the flames were demanding tribute for the millions of dead who had been left behind. Yet the fire would give birth to ashes, and the ashes would be the seed for a new phoenix, which in times to come would rise from them with a mighty flap of its wings.

8

>• Vienna, 18 November

It was only on the seventeenth ring that the buzzing of the alarm clock penetrated Hans Weigert's brain. The alarm clock was indifferent to this. It would
continue to buzz as long as electricity flowed through its electronic innards. Until the end of time, if need be. Or until a master commanded its circuits to stop – and pressed the button marked 'Off'.

After the twenty-second ring, it was time to issue that command. Weigert rolled over and groped with his right hand for the troublemaker, or, more precisely: for that white plastic button through which the master could convey his orders to the machine.

The first two attempts failed, which was probably because Weigert had buried his head in the pillow and his hand was groping blindly towards the alarm clock, relying solely on the sense of touch in his fingers.
But then she succeeded. A quick press and the buzzing stopped. The Master

had given his command.

Weigert didn't hold it against the alarm clock. To him, it was like a ferryman who transported him from one world to another every morning. Out of the realm of dreams, and into the reality of life. In the morning, Weigert's bodily functions ran slower than usual. It was as though life had decided, by slowing down the pace at which it progressed, to stretch out time and thus prolong itself. But the trick could not succeed. For the world outside pulsed at its usual speed, demanding that people take their places within it and adapt to the pace. And so, day after day, Weigert's body had to synchronise the speed of its processes with the world anew.

It was time to do so once again. Things that could not be changed simply had to be accepted.

As he sat up, he felt a pounding in his head. The previous night was taking its toll. Slowly, the
back. Which pub had it been? The ‘Foggy Dew’ with its delicious imports from Ireland, none of them under 43
per cent by volume? Or was it the

"A flood of beer", where a dozen taps jutted out of the wall, from which streams of barley juice seemed never-ending? No, not really. It must have been

"Foggy Dew". The pounding in his head grew louder. Only a

little light filtered through the closed blinds of the
bedroom window. Yet it was quite enough to find his way around. On the bedside table, the overflowing ashtray, next to it an empty cigarette packet and a lighter. Two glasses, one of which still contained the dregs of whisky, completed the still life. Two
glasses!?

Weigert turned his head to the right. The
was met with pain.
She was still lying there. One leg jutted out from under the duvet – what a leg! Waves of long, blonde hair flowed over her bare shoulders. Her eyes – yesterday they had been deep blue, as far as Weigert could remember – were closed. Her eyeshadow had smudged a little. It must have happened when their hot bodies had entwined to storm the peak of pleasure.

Weigert had met her yesterday, at the ‘Foggy Dew’ probably. Her name… Was it Eva? No, he would have remembered that. But there was an ‘E’ in it. Daniela, perhaps? Perhaps. Or perhaps not.

Whatever the case. Before he left, he would have to wake her. But there was still time until then. What time was it, anyway? The alarm clock. It had other duties besides buzzing. A glance told Weigert that it was already twenty past nine, time to let the day take its course.

He got out of bed carefully. He didn't want to wake her up yet. Conversations the morning after usually turned out to be awkward. Weigert had often Weigert had wondered how he could avoid this situation. But he hadn't found a solution yet. And so he tried to keep communication to a minimum.

The bedroom was in chaos. Clothes were strewn everywhere. At that moment, he was standing right on top of his jeans. Her skirt lay by the open door. Two steps further on, still in the hall, were the black knickers he'd taken off her there. Folded up, they'd probably be no bigger than a postage stamp. Halfway to the door, his shirt – which had been white just yesterday morning – covered the carpet.

Someone had accidentally spilled red wine over it the night before – and a poor vintage at that. He

would certainly not be able to wear it today. A sock peeked out from underneath. And right next to it lay her black hold-up stockings, whose seams had so invitingly accentuated her long legs.
Weigert was actually looking for his underpants. But they were nowhere to be seen. He decided to stay as he was: naked.

When he saw his face in the bathroom mirror, he was pleasantly surprised. He'd expected worse. The fact that he wore his black hair quite short had once again proved its worth. It wasn't too dishevelled. The stubble gave him a slightly daring look, so he decided to skip the shave. His green eyes still looked a bit sleepy, but after a proper shower and a headache tablet, that would sort itself out too.

Weigert turned on the tap – ice-cold water – and stood under the stream. That was his way of getting himself going and falling in step with the rhythm of the world. His body still bore a hint of the tan from the previous summer. It had been a lovely, hot summer, just the sort Weigert liked.

Whenever his schedule allowed, he had driven out at the weekends to one of the many lakes that dotted the landscape of the Salzkammergut or Carinthia.

He hadn't taken a proper holiday; he'd saved that for next year. Five weeks in Scotland. The Highlands. Misty valleys.
Cosy evenings by the fireside. Smoky pubs. Bagpipes. Malt whisky. Next year.

The cold water splashed over his body and brought it to life. You could still tell from Weigert's build that he had done plenty of sport – albeit many years ago. But his job had left him with less and less time for it. And so he had eventually given it up altogether. Instead, his cigarette consumption had increased – probably an occupational hazard for journalists.

Weigert turned off the water and reached for the towel.

As he dried himself, he decided to skip breakfast. There wouldn't be enough time anyway. He would catch up on it at the office.

As he went into the bedroom to fetch some clean clothes from the wardrobe, the blonde angel who had sweetened his night woke up. When she opened her eyes, Weigert saw that his memory had not deceived him. They really were deep blue.

"Good morning!"

"Morning!"

"What time is it?" Her voice sounded quite alert. Apparently, she wasn't just a night owl.

"Half past nine. I'm afraid I have to go. Work calls."

"Do you always start this late?"

“Most of the time. Being a journalist has its advantages.”

“So does student life.”

Now it came back to him: French and history, she’d said yesterday. She was fluent in French, no doubt about it. They hadn’t got round to history.

“So, I suppose I’d better get out of here?”

“Exactly, my darling.”

“Well then…” She threw back the duvet and climbed out of bed. Had it been earlier, Weigert wouldn’t have been able to resist. But it was half past nine. And life outside was already in full swing. He didn’t want to keep it waiting.

She gathered her things from the floor.

“Have you by any chance seen my

knickers?” “They’re outside, in the hall.”

She laughed.

“Oh yes, that’s right.”

Actually, she was quite likeable.

She bent down to pick up her knickers. The gracefulness of the movement showed that she was aware of the effect she was having. She liked her body; she’d already shown him that the night before.

“How can I get hold of you?”

“I’ll write my phone number down for you.”

She pulled her knickers up. The sheer front was just enough to cover the bare essentials. There was nothing at the back, if you

a thin strip of fabric.

Weigert had a lot to say about such views.

10

She reached for her handbag and pulled out a pen and a piece of paper.

While she wrote down her number, Weigert buttoned up his shirt. He hoped that at least he'd be spared any red wine stains today.

"There!"

She held the note out to him. As he reached for it, she kissed

him. "Don't throw it away."

"I'll guard it like the apple of my eye. It's about time for me to go now…"

"All right." She'd got the hint and quickly got dressed.

"See you soon, stubble."

One more kiss, and she was gone. She hadn't written her name down for him.

When Weigert pulled up the blinds to let the no longer quite so fresh morning air into the bedroom, he realised that a glorious day was dawning outside. Only the sun, it seemed to him, was standing a little lower than usual at this time of day.

11

Vienna, 18 November

Franz Hawlicek, one of the editorial runners, was the first to bump into Weigert.

“Hello Hans! You don’t look too well today. Been on a drinking binge again, have you?”

Weigert liked Hawlicek, but did he really have to be so loud?

“Every night has its price. I hear yours was rather expensive two days ago. If we didn’t have several editorial couriers, we could have delivered the post ourselves.”

Hawlicek raised a finger to his lips, like a conspirator fearing his secret plan might be uncovered.

“But, but… I had a terrible migraine. What else could I do but stay at home?”

"See? With the same migraine, I drag myself into the newsroom on all fours to get on with my work.

And how am I received?"

"All right, all right. Still, I’m in favour of introducing a zero-per-cent alcohol limit for editors at their computers. Then the paper would finally have a chance of becoming really good.

But nobody listens to me, of course."

Hawlicek enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in the newsroom that one wouldn't have expected given his role. He, the editorial messenger, was at the same time something of a court jester for the paper. He was allowed to say things that others preferred to keep to themselves. He
. Everyone knew it, and most accepted it too. Had he been an editor, he wouldn't have had it so easy. Yet as it was, he had often been the mouthpiece that trumpeted what would otherwise have been swallowed, and thus the icebreaker for long-
hardened fronts. That was his actual role within that sociotope of editors who made up the team at the 'Blatt'.

He was also the editorial messenger, on the side.

Seven years ago, Hans Weigert had set foot in the hallowed halls of *Der Blatt* for the first time. Just as today, the first person he had met in the editorial office back then had been Hawlicek. The two of them had bumped into each other right at the entrance. A huge pile of post that the courier had been carrying, had spilled out evenly across the floor.

"Well, well. A new suit-and-tie face." Hawlicek's greeting had not exactly been respectful. He had pointed to the letters on the floor: "I don't suppose there's anything in there for you yet."

Weigert had only just joined the "Blatt" from John Hopkins University in Bologna, where he had completed his PhD in Economics as part of a postgraduate programme.

He had had nothing to do with journalism up to that point. Yet the idea of working in a media organisation had always appealed to him. He had actually applied for a position in management. As luck would have it, he started as an editor. He hadn't regretted it so far.

Whilst he was messing about with Hawlicek, Weigert recalled his first moments at the

"Blatt," back then, when they'd both been picking up the scattered post. Hawlicek's voice interrupted his recollections.

“You’ve got to watch out today, Hans. The Short One’s in a right mood again.”

“The Short One”: that was the nickname the journalists at “Blatt” had given their editor-in-chief.

If one took a closer look at Dr Karl Bergmann, one had to admit that the nickname was aptly chosen.

“First he ran through the corridors shouting. Yesterday someone misspelled the name of our esteemed Chancellor.
Nobody noticed, and today it’s in the paper like that—to make matters worse, in a headline. When he finally caught the culprit, all hell broke loose. A hurricane is a gentle breeze in comparison.”

“And who was to blame?”

"Domestic policy, Joe Geissler. He’s probably been daydreaming again."

Weigert laughed. He could well picture his colleague Geissler sitting in front of the computer, whilst in his mind

on his sailing boat, the tiller firmly in his hand, ready to brave the waves of the sea.

What was the Chancellor compared to that?

Weigert took a fresh copy of the "Blatt" from the large pile lying in reception and set off for his office.

12

“Don’t get in the boss’s way, Hans. If he sees your crumpled face, we’ll have another storm on our hands.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll hide in the loo.” “There’s

no room in there now!”

As Weigert strolled down the corridor, he glanced at the
front page of the newspaper. He read the two headlines of the lead story first: “Russia to join the EPU? New talks in Moscow.”

The EPU, or European Political Union, had been established four years earlier as the final stage of the European Community. Austria, too, had joined the EPU after acceding to the then EC in 1995 following protracted negotiations. European integration had now progressed to such an extent that the EPU Council, acting virtually as a European government, had superseded national legislation in many areas. Brussels was now the
true heart of Europe; the other capitals had, in effect, been reduced to mere bit-part roles.

The revolutions in the Eastern European states in the late 1980s and early 1990s had led to the collapse of what had hitherto been subsumed under the term ‘Eastern Bloc’

. Within a very short time, more and more of these countries had shifted towards a democratic market economy.

Once again, in 1991, as the USSR was falling apart, orthodox communists had attempted to turn back the clock. Yet after they succeeded in ousting Mikhail Gorbachev, the architect of Soviet reform, the coup collapsed within a matter of days. As a result, the old guard was removed from its last positions of power. The Soviet Union did not survive this process. It had disintegrated into its constituent republics, which today

held together only by the loose ties of a federation.

The result was a rapid economic catch-up that continues to this day. What no one had thought possible at the start of the 1980s had come to pass: Russia and most of the other republics had become
democratic states. Karl Marx was probably still turning in his grave.

The economy of the West—insofar as the term ‘West’ was still of any use—was preparing to conquer the vast market that had now become accessible. It was therefore hardly surprising that the republics that had
the republics that had emerged from the USSR, led by Russia, had shown an ever-increasing interest first in the EC and later in the EPU. Letters of intent regarding integration had been in place for a few years. For several months, however, these had evolved into proper accession negotiations. The world was growing ever closer together.

Weigert opened the door to his office, which he shared with three other colleagues. One of them was already there.

“Good morning, everyone!”

“Whether it’s a good morning remains to be seen.”

Heinz Tolmein had at least one trait that characterised the born-and-bred Austrian: grumbling. He always found something that didn’t suit him. Weigert had never really seen him relaxed and content. You could see it in his face: there was a hint of bitterness there, though it was too faint to truly combat what he perceived as oppressive. He probably didn’t even want to. The Austrian in Tolmein needed this ambivalence of suffering and simultaneously lamenting it. That was the masochistic essence of his life.

Weigert didn’t particularly like him, but he respected him as a good journalist. He sat down at his desk opposite Tolmein.

“Where’s the rest of the staff?”

“Erich is at a press conference with the Foreign Minister of the Maghreb Republic, and Wolfgang has left today on his business trip to Japan. You could at least have remembered that.”

"I'm sitting here on my own, acting as a switchboard operator for the three of you. You could have come earlier."

Tolmein paused, looked at Weigert and said: "From the look on your face , I can tell that the sobering-up process couldn’t have been finished any sooner.”

It was all getting a bit much. When he’d looked in the mirror that morning, it hadn’t seemed so bad. Now Weigert had barely been in the newsroom for ten minutes, and already two people had mentioned it to him.

“And I can tell from your face that, for you, the left foot always takes precedence

."

Weigert reached into his trouser pocket to get his cigarettes out. “You

can save yourself the trouble.”

"Why on earth? Have you introduced a smoking ban overnight? I might as well hand in my notice straight away."

"No smoking ban. Hillgruber wants to see you."

The head of department was known as a militant non-smoker. In the corridor outside his office stood an ashtray with a sign on which a cigarette drawn on it, split in two by a thick red line. Above it read: “I must stay outside.” One day, they’d all bought cigars and walked in with them. After all, the sign only showed

a cigarette. Since then, three signs had been hanging there: one for cigarettes, one for cigars and one for pipes. Perhaps they would soon get hold of some hookahs.

“What does Hillgruber want?”

“No idea, I’m not your secretary, after all. Ask him yourself.” “All right.”

Weigert put the cigarettes away again and set off.

"Good afternoon, Mr Weigert. I have the following problem..." Dr Werner Hillgruber always got straight to the point. Long preambles were not his style. Hillgruber was a journalist through and through and one of the best-known and finest
in the country. Although he could be hard on his staff at times, one could not deny that he showed a certain degree of care for them. Whenever there were disputes with the editor-in-chief, he stood firmly behind ‘his’

editors. He protected them wherever he could. He settled his own scores with them. And so, despite the enormous demands he relentlessly placed on his staff time and again, he was popular in his department.

But the editors also accepted him because of a simple fact: it was not some obscure majority decision that had put him in the position of head of the world politics desk, but a circumstance that was far superior to that: he was quite simply the best of them.

No one doubted it.

"Rittmeier from the business desk had an interview scheduled for today with Bernhard Volker, the President of the European Central Bank. As you know, he is in Vienna for two days for talks."

Weigert didn’t know. But who actually read the business section?

"Yes, of course."

"Unfortunately, she now has to cover another event. Some sort of symposium at the UN City. As the business desk is extremely short-staffed at the moment, we'll have to take over Volker."

When Hillgruber spoke of "we", he could only have meant him, Weigert. And there it was.

"Could you do that? The appointment is set for 6 pm, at the hotel 'The Imperial', where Volker lives. The room number is..."

Hillgruber rummaged through his hopelessly cluttered desk. Finally, he held up a piece of paper triumphantly.

"Here it is: room number 1717. Easy to remember."

"All right. Can we still get the story into the late edition?" "If you hurry,

yes. I'll make sure we have a fountain pen in the morning edition, which can then be rushed out. If you don't manage it, then tomorrow. We have the exclusive, so there's no great rush."

Weigert started to leave. As he reached the door, he heard Hillgruber behind him. "Are you unwell, Mr Weigert? You look a bit under the weather."

When Weigert turned round, he saw that Hillgruber was smiling.

"You're already the third person to express concern. Perhaps I should see a facial surgeon."

"I wonder if the ladies at the newspaper would appreciate that? Joking aside, Weigert, perhaps you could put on a tie when you go to see the Eurofed president. Otherwise, the boss will be on my
."

14

Vienna, 18 November

Whilst Hans Weigert was rummaging through the depths of his desk for a tie, Bernhard Volker was just tying his own. He was standing in the bathroom of his hotel suite. Whenever he was in Vienna, he used to stay at the 'Imperial'. They knew him there already, and were quick to fulfil his wishes.

After all, Volker was one of the most important men in Europe. As President of the European Central Bank, he was the master of the ECU, which had replaced the national European currencies a few years earlier. Now this artificial construct was the strongest currency in the world, even more significant than the US dollar. And so much depended on the policies of the Eurofed – as the bank was called in reference to its American counterpart –: states, companies, people, destinies.

The power of the little man from Germany, whose head was now covered with only a sparse patch of hair, was not based on real values, but solely on an artificial construct that had spread like a veil – or a spider's web – over the economies of the modern age: money. Everything became entangled in this web. It was the focal point of
life and desires, the driving force of modern society. And Bernhard Volker was the engineer.

With practised fingers, he twisted the ends of his tie together to tie them into a knot.

He scrutinised the result critically in the mirror. He was a perfectionist down to the last detail. He would never have forgiven himself for a poorly tied knot.

A quick glance at the Cartier Santos on his wrist told him it was nearly time: 11.11. In three quarters of an hour

he would be meeting the Austrian Finance Minister. He hated this petty provincial treasurer, who refused to accept that Europe's monetary policy was made in Luxembourg, where the Eurofed had its headquarters. These Austrians always had complaints and special requests.
Couldn't they just go along with it? They were still thinking far too much in terms of the nation state. But those concepts had long since become obsolete.

In Austria, things always seemed to lag a little behind. That was Volker's opinion, and today he was going to make his host feel it.

He stepped out of the bathroom into one of the suite's two living rooms. His two bodyguards were already waiting there, just as he had instructed them the night before.

"Good afternoon, Mr President."

Volker did not return their greeting.

"Where is Helmstedt? He knows full well how much I hate lateness."

Volker was annoyed. It wasn't so much the delay that bothered him, but rather the fact that his secretary had the audacity to keep him waiting.

One of the bodyguards felt compelled to smooth over the rising tension.

"I just saw him at breakfast. He should be here any minute."

There was a knock at the door.

Volker signalled to the man to open the door. Helmstedt was about to get a beating.

The bodyguard turned the door handle and opened the door. Before surprise could even show on his face, death came. Quick, precise and relentless.

15

Vienna, 18 November

“What on earth are you looking

for?” Tolmein could be infuriating.

“My tie.”

“What for? Are you planning to hang yourself?”

“You idiot. I’m supposed to interview Volker this evening.”

"Of course. Rittmeier has something better to do again. And we're expected to step in yet again."

"Now you're starting with 'we' too. It's me who ends up with all the work, not you!"

"Last time it was definitely me. You know, when…" Weigert

cut him off.

"Do you perhaps have a tie for me?"

"Only the one I'm wearing. And I need that myself." "What

for? Are you planning to hang yourself?"

"Oh, just be nice to me!"

Weigert would manage even without a tie. At least he'd found his dictaphone again whilst searching. He'd been missing it for weeks. To make sure the tapes didn't run out of space, he had to put together a few questions. Volker was regarded by journalists as a difficult interviewee. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd even agreed to meet.

Weigert sat down at the computer and began scrolling through the news agency reports on the screen. Keyword 'Volker', keyword 'Eurofed', keyword 'ECU'.

The list kept getting longer, so he narrowed it down to the last four weeks.

24 hours a day, round the clock, the news agencies were churning out their reports.

Whether it was the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse or the World News Agency, which emerged from United Press International – they all tried their hand at the hunt for news.

Even if the stories were sometimes trivial, there was constant, fierce competition. Every now and then, Weigert doubted the point of this chase, the results of which were often out of date by the very next day, or even hours later. But ultimately, he was right in the thick of it himself, so he usually pushed these doubts aside as quickly as they arose.

The agencies provided the basis for every media outlet, ‘all the news that’s fit to print’, as the saying went in the industry. The icing on the cake, however, was the
“Blatt’s” extensive network of correspondents. A total of 42 men and women were stationed in the world’s major cities, from where they sent their own stories to the editorial team’s computer system.
Any areas that the correspondents were unable to cover, or events that were too extensive for one person to handle, were managed by the main editorial office in Vienna. Weigert travelled around the globe an average of ten to twelve times a year. That was what he valued most: conducting research far from his desk, right at the heart of the action. He found travelling to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of his job.

Whenever he pressed too hard for another foreign assignment, he would occasionally fall out with his colleagues. Although not everyone was as keen on travelling as he was, they were left to do the daily drudgery: rewriting agency reports, laying out pages, devising commentaries, and assigning correspondents. Ultimately, it was the people in Vienna who coordinated everything and, day after day, produced the final product: the ‘paper’.

The rise of electronic media had severely curtailed the tabloid press in recent years. The electronic information revolution – some even spoke of a disinformation revolution – had, however, largely left the high-quality newspapers unscathed. These were able to hold their ground, and in many cases even expand their reach. The

“Blatt” was one of them.

Before Austria’s accession to the European Community, it was one of the country’s two reputable and serious newspapers. The "Blatt"’s target audience was not the masses, but opinion leaders. And so its influence was ultimately greater than its circulation figures would suggest.

16

The *Blatt* had adapted to the new situation in a united Europe better than expected: rather than losing market share, it managed to carve out a slice of the pie in Germany and later in Switzerland, albeit a relatively modest one. From an international perspective, the “Blatt” certainly ranked among the “also-rans”.

Weigert had printed out around three dozen reports. He was just about to start sorting them when the door flew open and an agitated Hillgruber stormed in. The department head planted himself in front of Weigert’s desk. Tolmein stopped typing on his computer.

“You can leave the tie off, Mr Weigert.”

“How nice. Have the dress code rules for interviews been changed? Or does Mr Eurofed President prefer to receive me in my pyjamas?”

“Stop this nonsense. Volker can no longer see you. He’s been shot at the ‘Imperial’

."

Tolmein spoke up: "Just as I told you. It always falls on us."

Victims shot dead in assassinations, bodies torn apart by explosives, corpses brutally massacred, piled up in heaps: for journalists covering world politics, not a day went by without such reports. Sometimes they were there in person. Death was a constant companion of political events.

And cynicism was part and parcel of the job.

Hillgruber, too, was by no means upset because Volker had been shot. He was excited because he sensed a story.

“The Chronicle has tapped the police radio. It must have happened about 20 minutes ago. Grab a taxi and head straight to
'Imperial'. Find out as much as you can! I’ll speak to the boss in the meantime so we can get space on the front page.”

“Isn’t that actually the local desk’s job?”

Weigert wasn’t exactly keen on getting into a row with a couple of policemen.

“I told the news editor we’d take over the investigation. They were only too happy, as most of their staff were still tied up with the big toxic waste scandal.”

That was typical of Hillgruber: after all, more stories handled by his department meant greater prestige and thus more influence for him. Whenever possible, he pounced and snatched up topics. After all, he was on his way to replacing Bergmann as editor-in-chief. Even though two attempts had already failed, he was sure to succeed eventually.
Bergmann didn’t have long to go before his retirement.

“Hurry up. Perhaps you can get there before the crowd arrives. And you, Mr Tolmein, put together an obituary for Volker in the meantime.”

Weigert hailed a taxi, flung the door open and flung himself into the passenger seat.

“Hotel Imperia, but as quickly as possible!”

The driver gave him a sullen look and set off without
any particular haste. Weigert held a banknote under his nose.

“Fancy earning a bit extra? Then step on it!”

“Will you cover the fines too?”

“Don’t worry about that. The police have their hands full with a major manhunt at the moment.”

Weigert didn’t know what had convinced the driver most. In any case, he was doing his best. It was just after half past eleven. The editorial deadline was at 4.30 pm. So he would have plenty of time to put together a decent story. Weigert knew from experience that a political murder – if that was indeed what it was – involving a man of Volker’s calibre would keep him busy for at least the next few days, if not weeks. And for Weigert, that meant his name would appear on the front page of the *Blatt* every day during that time. Not a bad prospect, really, for making a name for himself once again.

Even from a distance, one could make out the flashing blue lights of the police vehicles. As his taxi driver was about to turn into the side lane of the Ringstrasse where the Imperial was located, the car was stopped by two policemen. Both were carrying submachine guns. Their expressions promised little friendliness. The driver rolled down the window.

“What’s going on here?”

“Can’t you see you can’t drive up to the hotel? Back up and get on with it.”

17

Weigert had already jumped out of the car and handed the driver a few notes. The promised tip was among them.

“That’s right!”

"You’re not allowed to walk through here either!"

Now the second policeman, the shorter of the two, had spoken up. Weigert had experience with officials like this, less so in Austria, more so abroad. But the type was basically always the same.

“Do you recognise this?”

Weigert had pulled out his press card and was waving it in front of the two officers’ faces.

“I’m from *Blatt*. Surely the press will be allowed in? After all, the public has a right to be informed.”

The policeman’s tone suddenly became at least two notches friendlier.

“So you’re Mr Weigert. I read your articles very...”

“I’m glad to hear it. If you want to read something again tomorrow, please let me through.

I must hurry.”

"Of course. Captain Warda is in charge of the press and television. You'll find him at the hotel."

Weigert pushed his way through the crowd and hurried towards the entrance.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a television station's broadcast van heading towards the hotel. The pack was on the hunt.

Weigert also showed his ID to the plainclothes detectives standing at the entrance. He got into the lift and went upstairs. The lift doors opened. Weigert realised that he was by no means the first of his profession to arrive. The police radio had obviously been tapped elsewhere too. A police officer, apparently the officer in charge, was already surrounded by five journalists

– three men and two women. Weigert recognised two of his colleagues.

"Hello, Margarete! You're here already?"

"Of course, or did you think we were asleep?"

His colleague had pulled out a pencil; in her right hand she held a notepad, and a dictaphone protruded from her handbag.

"Has he said anything yet?"

Weigert gestured towards the

policeman.

"No, not yet. He's not really involved in the search. He's just supposed to update the people outside on the latest developments in the investigation. He'll probably go into one of the rooms so we don't overhear anything. And the officers from the Homicide Squad have only just arrived." "Hans, old

chap!"

It was Tim Jacobs from BBC Radio in Vienna. A few months ago, Weigert had been travelling around Africa with him and a few other journalists at the invitation of the United Nations.

His fiery red hair was hard to miss. Like a lighthouse, thought Weigert.

“What’s new, Tim?”

“All hell’s going to break loose here in ten minutes.”

Jacobs’ German was almost accent-free.

“You’re certainly right about that.”

Weigert looked around. It had already started. Two photographers were snapping away for all they were worth. The TV crew, whom Weigert had first seen arriving, were just stepping out of the lift: a cameraman, a sound engineer, two reporters. The cameraman already had his camera at the ready and was filming the two policemen who had taken up position a few metres away in front of a room door. Presumably the entrance to Volker’s suite, thought Weigert. A cord, presumably from the hotel’s supplies, was stretched across the corridor. It was meant to prevent the journalists from getting too close to the crime scene. A few uniformed officers who had lined up in front of it further emphasised this.

18

Sometimes chance directs things quite effectively. You just had to know how to make use of it.

Weigert knew one of the policemen. He and Walter Müller had been schoolmates. After leaving school, their paths had diverged. Whilst Müller had tried his luck at the police academy, Weigert had been drawn to university. A few weeks after he
When he had returned from Bologna to start working at *Der Blatt*, he had bumped into Müller by chance. One beer led to another, and they hit it off straight away, just as they had in their school days. Since then

the two of them met a few times a year to chat and play billiards.

“Walter!”

The man in question turned round.

“You’re just what I needed here!” Weigert

pulled Müller slightly to one side.

“How’s it looking in there?”

He pointed to the door marked 1717. “You’re after

some inside information, aren’t you?” “Of course,

why else would we know each other?”

“I can’t tell you any more than Warda already has.” Warda was the man Weigert had taken to be the head of operations.

"I wasn’t there when he first started spouting his wisdom."

“Well, we’ve got three dead bodies in there. Apparently this top banker Bernhard Volker and his two bodyguards. The bodies were found by Volker’s secretary, a certain Helmstedt. All three have been shot, that much is certain.”

“And?”

“Nothing else. That’s all there is to it.”

“What’s the situation with the manhunt for the perpetrators?”

“As far as I know, nothing. But it’s only been half an hour. We might still have a chance of catching them.”

“Could you let me have a quick look at the bodies?” “You know that’s

not possible.”

“As far as I can see, you’re still the highest-ranking officer here at the moment, along with that Warda over there. So, Müllerchen. You know I need a bit of colour for my story.”

“The Chief Constable will be here any minute, Hans!”

"That's quite a boost. But you could still take the chance." "I don't

know..."

"In return, I’ll let you win at snooker next time. Well, is that an offer?"

"All right then. Come on, and make sure your colleagues don’t catch wind of it. Otherwise they’ll all want to come in."

"They’re fully occupied with that Warda." "Do you

have a camera with you?"

"No, I forgot it."

"Just as well. I’d have taken it off you anyway." "Don’t you

trust me, then?"

"Who trusts a journalist?"

Müller lifted the rope and Weigert slipped underneath. One of the press photographers saw this, rushed over and wanted to come along too. Müller held him back.

“Sorry.”

It’s a good thing the photographer didn’t recognise him, thought Weigert. He probably took him for a plainclothes policeman.

If he’d known he was working for the ‘Blatt’, there would have been an uproar.

Müller opened the door and stepped aside so that Weigert could take a look inside. The forensic experts were
already at work. They looked up briefly. When they saw that no one was making a move to enter the room, they carried on working.

The first of the bodyguards lay right by the door. A bullet had struck him right between the eyes. He must have been the first to
had been caught, without even the slightest chance of reaching for the pistol which, now that his jacket had slipped back, was peeking out from under his left armpit. The second bodyguard sat slumped in an armchair 19

at the back of the room. A bullet had struck him directly in the heart. It had abruptly halted the movement with which the bodyguard had been about to grab the submachine gun lying on a small side table next to him.

Volker himself was lying in the corridor leading to the bathroom. Weigert recognised him immediately. He’d seen him often enough in photos or on television. The perpetrator or perpetrators had shot him from behind as he’d tried to flee into the adjoining bathroom. Volker was lying on his back. A policeman was drawing a white chalk line around the outline of his strangely contorted body.

The most striking thing about Volker’s body, however, was his forehead. Weigert looked more closely.

“This can’t be true!”

Now Müller, who had been keeping watch in the corridor, looked in as well.

"What's going on?" "Can you see that?"

"What?"

"There! On Volker’s forehead! They must have branded it right onto him!" "Could be."

Müller focused his attention back on the corridor.

Weigert stared at Volker’s corpse. Something must have scorched his forehead, leaving an ugly, blackened mark. It was a sort of sun with twelve rays angled at their ends, forming something like a wheel.

Weigert committed the mark to memory. If he’d known that this moment would bring about a radical change in his life, he would have forgotten it straight away. But from now on, nothing would ever be the same for him again.

20

Vienna, 18 November

It was just after half past eight. The pub was about two-thirds full, but more people were constantly pushing their way in. It was hot.
Wafts of smoke filled the air, forming a blanket of mist that

a jungle after a downpour. The ventilation was poor, as one could feel with every breath.

Music came from two speakers mounted above the bar. The muffled, rumbling bass filled the room, causing both people and furnishings to feel a slight, almost imperceptible vibration. Accompanying this was a voice that unmistakably belonged to a Black woman –

deep, rough and rich.

The bar was one of those that were constantly springing up all over the city. Although they sometimes differed markedly in décor, music and clientele, they drew their raison d'être from the same source: they were a pseudo-home and the centre of life for the many. The few would only very rarely set foot inside, and would find their own attitudes merely confirmed in doing so.

Weigert leaned his back against the bar and watched the people. They were young. By and large not teenagers, but mostly in their twenties and thirties. He estimated that not quite half were women or girls. A few of them strikingly pretty, some of repulsive
ugliness, most average. It was likely no different with the men, he thought. Yet Weigert lacked the sure eye for that here.

The people stood or sat together in small or large groups. Some were chatting, which the volume of the music, unlike in many other venues of this sort, still made reasonably possible.

Zombies – the living dead. Weigert's friend Peter Villiger, whom he was now waiting for, had applied that term to the people around them when the two of them had stood here once before. At first, they'd found it amusing and had laughed at the idea.

But then they had taken the idea further, and their laughter had given way to seriousness.

Villiger had hit the nail on the head.

Of course, it didn't apply to everyone. But the zombie species was spreading inexorably. Their bodies seemed alive, yet the souls within them were dead.

And yet they displayed a remarkable vitality on the outside, a vitality, admittedly, that resembled the pacing of predators in cages. It was a blind reaction to external stimuli, unchecked by any personality of their own.

The zombies shuttled between their trendy bars, chic boutiques and overcrowded gyms. They panted after the trends that the zeitgeist presented to them via the media. Yet the trends were nothing more than clever marketing strategies. They were constantly changing, thereby creating the illusion of progress where, in reality, there was stagnation. Anyone who fell behind in the race for the latest fashions ran the risk of being treated as an outcast. Yet, in the eyes of the zombies, it was still worth joining the fray. The prize was valuable, for it offered something they could not give themselves, as their inner strength had long since faded: a purpose in life and a sense of identity.

However vibrant they might seem, the zombies were nothing more than a dead shell for the goods stuffed into them. It was an artificial life they allowed to be breathed into them, in order to supposedly rise above the agony of their mediocrity.

Weigert did not like the zombies. And yet he feared being infected by this species' drive for expansion. The temptations were numerous. So far, he had resisted them.

Sometimes, when Weigert noticed them, he found them amusing. Sometimes he felt a sense of resentment creeping over him.

And sometimes a spark of hatred flashed through him, directed less at the zombies themselves than at the system behind them, which had taken their real lives away to exchange them for an artificial placebo.

Although the zombies were merely cogs in a colourful, glittering machine, they had long since taken centre stage in society. Yet, unlike in the past, there seemed to be no lone heroes left in the play, only the chorus of the masses.

21

Peter Villiger was rarely on time; Weigert knew that, so he ordered another beer to pass the time. He was pretty knackered, but satisfied. After returning to the newsroom, he had typed his article into the computer. Now it was splashed across the front page of the 'Blatt' as the lead story. The perpetrator or perpetrators had not been apprehended. It was hardly to be expected otherwise. On the television news across the various channels, the murder of the Eurofed president and his two bodyguards had, of course, been the top story, and
the other newspapers had given it prominent coverage, as Weigert was able to see for himself in the evening editions.

But Weigert was a step ahead of everyone else: the glimpse through the door had given him an information advantage that the others would only be able to catch up on tomorrow, when the police issued their first official statements. He was the only journalist to have seen the body
Volkers had seen it, and with it, what had been done to her.

Time and again, the symbol that had disfigured the murdered man's forehead appeared in Weigert's thoughts: a circle in the centre, from which radiated twelve rays angled at their ends, which in turn were enclosed by a
circle – a sun? Now that Weigert

recalled, he also noticed that there had been a strange smell in the room. Charred flesh. That was why. A black sun? But why? If this was a political murder

—and the circumstances, as well as Volker's character, certainly pointed to that—then a letter of confession would surely have been simpler.

He knew he couldn't solve it now. Tomorrow the police would satisfy the media's insatiable appetite for information. Then he would see what happened next. But today he was here to meet his friend. Weigert glanced at his watch: fifteen minutes late – that was still okay.

He let his gaze wander around the pub. The zombies came to mind again. And something else: refugees, he thought; yes, the zombies are refugees. They are afraid to face their persecutors: loneliness, monotony, meaninglessness. And if the zombies are refugees, then this pub is a refugee camp, one of many.

Just as the strong drift apart, the weak drift towards one another. They cannot bear the silence of the loneliness that reigns on the peaks, which only the few can climb.

The zombies huddle together, just like a herd fearing the wolf.

Weigert took a big gulp of his beer, almost defiantly, as if that could change anything.

Another glance at his watch showed him that Villiger's delay had now grown to 20

minutes.

At the bar to his left stood two girls and a man. One of the girls, a blonde, was smartly dressed. She reminded him a little of the one he'd found in his bed that morning. Her white, high-necked blouse revealed that beneath it

two shapely breasts were concealed beneath. Their outlines were more than clearly visible through the sheer fabric. Her black leather miniskirt clung tightly to her body. Where it ended – having ridden up slightly – just below her waistband, the top of her stockings was visible on her right leg.

Weigert liked that sort of thing. And yet he didn't. Deep down, there was a chasm separating two souls within him. On one side of the chasm lay the world of the many, a world of vast plains and no obstacles. On the other side of the chasm lay the realm of the few, with high, snow-capped peaks from which one could gaze down splendidly upon the landscape on the other side of the chasm. And yet this chasm was no absolute boundary. It merely organised, which manifested itself in Weigert as duplicity. He was the dividing line between the two sides. Weigert's mind was still unaware of this. His heart, however, knew full well.

It was always the same game, thought Weigert, as he scrutinised the girl. The uniforms and rituals of the night were the same too.

Her face wasn't exactly strikingly beautiful, but she had tried to improve on that with make-up, eyeshadow and blush.
That, and her carefully styled hair, showed that she had probably spent at least half an hour in front of the mirror before fleeing into the darkness of the night.

22

The blonde and her friend listened attentively, smiling now and then, to the man standing with them. He was just telling them about his last holiday on some island, describing the surfing course he'd taken there and the hotel with its daily morning aerobics classes. It wasn't exactly a thrilling tale, no real adventures, but more of a list of what he had consumed.

Weigert watched the man with growing amusement. Whilst he was talking, he was almost desperately trying to adopt as
casual posture as possible. At one point, he put his right hand in his
He put his hand in his trouser pocket and leaned on the bar with his left hand. Then he pulled a car key out of his pocket again to fiddle with it. It was all about the look, even if it remained just an attempt here. The man was reminiscent of someone trying to give up smoking and – for lack of a cigarette in his hand – looking for a substitute. There was a pendant attached to the key ring. Displayed on it, impossible to miss, was the logo of a well-known luxury car brand.

Weigert had seen the man before, out on the street, when he'd parked his car. As far as he could remember, it had been an older small car. The blonde didn't seem to know that yet; otherwise her smile might well have faded.

Without realising it, Weigert crossed the chasm within himself and looked down from the summit of the Few into the valley of the Many: and there he saw people like the man with the car key.

These people, who believed themselves to be the winners in the great game of life, were the true losers. For they had lost their souls, sold them for colourful trinkets. And in their arrogance, they even believed they had struck a good deal.

The time had come for the most contemptible of people, those who could no longer even despise themselves. Yet they were not bad people. They believed they were living, but the stench of death already clung to them.
Despite everything, they remained what they were.

The barman, who tapped him on the shoulder, snapped him out of his thoughts. He pointed to Weigert's now empty glass.

"Another one?"

Weigert nodded silently. As the man behind the bar tapped the beer, he took a closer look at him.

He was a little older than most of his customers. His face bore a hint of the South American sun, a touch of the Asian steppes and a dash of the coolness of autumnal Europe.

His long, black hair was tied back in a plait at the nape of his neck. He wore black trousers that ended just below the knee. With them, a purple shirt and a bow tie whose colourfulness was almost indescribable. Through his left earlobe, he had threaded a thin, golden ring.

Weigert couldn't help but smile, and he did so from a snow-capped peak. All non-conformists showed conformity in at least one respect, he thought: in the display of their outward individuality, which was, after all, merely a shell and not substance. Meanwhile, the barman set his beer down in front of him.

Weigert was slowly getting angry, as he always did when Peter Villiger was too late. But his anger vanished immediately when he realised that this would be his last meeting with him for a long time to come.

Peter'd had enough; he wanted out of this country, or so he said. In reality, he wanted away from this crowd. Countless nights the two friends had spent together – drinking, raving, cursing or simply talking.

Villiger had always been a restless sort, 'always on the move', as he put it himself. But without any real destination, as Weigert had sometimes accused him of.

The two had met in the army, in the damp mud of the training grounds, on the hard tarmac of the parade grounds, and in the musty rooms of the barracks where they had both been stationed. It was now ten years since they – among the first volunteers after the abolition of compulsory military service in Austria – had nevertheless enlisted in the
.

‘Nevertheless’ – that had always been their motto, their very personal resistance to whatever was currently in vogue, their swimming against the tide, their search for a source they would probably never reach.

23

The phenomenon of war, once described as the father of all things, seemed long since to pose no real threat. Armies were being disbanded, weapons scrapped, barracks

. The outbreak of peace had been unstoppable ever since the Warsaw Pact had dissolved in the early nineties and the Soviet bear had proved toothless.

Yet war had undergone a metamorphosis, though certainly not a new one: the blood-soaked and impact-scarred ground of the battlefields had given way to the smooth parquet of the trading floors; the
The spartan underground command post from which the battle had been directed had been transformed into a sleek corporate headquarters, and the brokers’ mercenary spirit had supplanted the warrior’s ethos.

Weigert and Villiger had nevertheless enlisted in the Austrian army, which had shrunk considerably since the 1990s and now consisted of only a very small cadre and a few thousand volunteers, each of whom signed up for a year. There, one of those old-fashioned male friendships had begun, in which a glance or a handshake says more than a thousand words.

To Weigert's right, a man who was lighting one cigarette after another was talking to a woman. He: an unassuming civil servant type; she: the secretary type. The conversation was more serious than the one he had overheard earlier. The man was clearly trying to pour his heart out.

Some sort of problem at work, difficulties with the boss—that much was clear.

She seemed bored, sipping her drink now and then and occasionally glancing around the room. It was only when he changed the subject, tried to place his hand on hers—which she kept pulling away—and began with something like "come home with me" that the boredom on her face gave way to cool rejection.

Weigert turned away. So there they stood. A glass in hand, trying to drown the last remnants of the longing slumbering deep within them. They sought comfort and found sex. They sought friendship and found betrayal. They believed themselves to be free. Yet their freedom was nothing more than the cheap right to wander aimlessly in the void.

By now the bar had filled up. A group of seven or eight people were already quite drunk. They were just ordering another round and laughing boisterously, already a touch too shrill for it to really be called funny. Two of them tried to clink their glasses. Some of the contents spilled across the table. Another member of the group was just addressing a girl who wanted to pass him on her way to the toilet. She turned away and squeezed past him amid the laughter of the others.

Behind her, Villiger pushed his way through the crowd. Unmistakable: 1.90 metres tall, burly, with long blond hair that reached down to his shoulders. Without a greeting, he pointed to the group Weigert had been watching and grinned as he did so.

“Most people just lick their plates clean and leave nothing but a pile of rubbish. But perhaps your rubbish serves as fertiliser for the fields where true people grow.”

"One of the 25 quotes you've learnt by heart! Samuel Butler, if I'm not mistaken."

"Quite right, old boy. Sorry I’m a bit late. But you know me.

At least that gave you a chance to get a beer in before me.” “Wrong. Two!”

"Bloody hell!"

Villiger waved a newspaper in his hand. It was the "Blatt".

“You’ve really gone for it again today. And right on the front page.”

His friend ordered a beer from the ‘clown’ at the bar – as he called him because of his clothes – and got Weigert to tell him the whole story in great detail.

“That sounds rather strange, this business with the black sun, as you say. Do you have any idea who might be behind the attack?”

“No idea. We’ll continue tomorrow morning. We’ll be grilling the police and the Home Secretary.”

“The Home Secretary straight away?”

“Volker wasn’t just any old mortal. There’s public interest, as they say. But let’s leave that. Do you

exactly when you’re due to start?”

24

"Yes, next Sunday. I picked up the ticket today."

"So I suppose this is the last beer we’ll be sharing for a while?"

"Don’t get all sentimental now. You’ll be coming to visit me next spring at the latest."

Weigert looked his friend over. Villiger was certainly a restless sort and had started many things in his life that he’d never finished. But this time, he seemed to be serious.

Until recently, he had been head of the PR department at a large company. He had risen through the ranks there in no time at all. But the higher he had stumbled up the career ladder – something he had never set out to do – the more doubts he had developed. The people in this country, as Villiger saw them, had long been a source of suspicion to him. Sometimes Weigert had the impression that his friend hated almost everyone, but at other times he also thought he was simply incapable of social relationships.

A few months ago, Villiger had finally decided to start a new life. At first, Weigert hadn’t wanted to believe it. Villiger had spent too long merely criticising things for Weigert to have believed he was capable of actually acting on his criticism. But on the day his friend told him he’d bought a log cabin in the middle of the Norwegian wilderness, his doubts vanished. He wanted to keep the flat in Vienna

he wanted to keep for another year, to leave himself a final loophole for a return. Weigert was to pop round and check on it now and then.

That was all Villiger left behind. No wife, hardly any friends, and no home either, for that would have had to be more than just the place where he was born. He had saved enough that, if he lived modestly, he could get by on it for a few years. Alongside that, he would continue to work a little, but only as much as was absolutely necessary. So the following Sunday was the day.

“So, how does it feel to be about to drop out?”

“Great. You know what Egger always used to say, don’t you? Never look back. Once you’re in the plane, you’ve got to jump.”

Egger had been one of their instructors in the military, specifically the one who had led the parachuting course that Weigert and Villiger had volunteered for.

“Here’s the spare key for my parachute.” Peter handed him

his flat keys.

“But no orgies there!”

“I hope you’ll at least leave a well-stocked bar.”

"I've put a bottle of malt whisky in there especially for you."

"How thoughtful. I can’t very well say no to that. Do you actually have a phone in your gingerbread house yet?"

"Yes. They gave me the number this week. Here."

He fished a piece of paper out of his pocket, which he’d torn from some notepad.

Weigert pocketed it.

They drank a few more glasses of beer. At around two in the morning, the two of them finally beckoned the clown over to pay. Then they stood facing each other outside in the cool autumn night.

Everything there was to say between them had been said over the years of their friendship. There was nothing left to do but say goodbye.

“Well then, take care, Hans.”

Villiger gave him a hearty slap on the

shoulder. “Do better! See you in the spring.”

Weigert punched him in the ribs.

A firm handshake, and they went their separate ways.

25

> San Francisco, 19 November

The morning sun sent its powerful rays against the glass
facade of the huge skyscraper. The light streaming through the window was broken up by the blinds into many small, sharply defined rays of sunlight that criss-crossed the room with their pattern.

Where they cut through the air, one could make out floating dust particles dancing in a frantic race, as if the sole aim were to win the favour of the light.

The room was so vast that even the monstrous dimensions of the
desk in its centre seemed almost small. The few
objects on the table were virtually lost on the reddish-brown surface

of mahogany: a delicate Art Nouveau lamp, the price of which probably far exceeded its size; a sleek, black videophone; a small granite cube that served as a paperweight, one half of which had been polished completely smooth whilst the other had retained its natural roughness; a simple gold ballpoint pen; a brown leather folder containing documents to be signed; a few letters and two
small stacks of computer printouts.

Behind the desk stood a black, high-backed leather armchair with armrests, the size of which gave a sense of its owner's importance. This armchair, however, was not facing the desk at that moment, but had been turned so that it faced the window. The gaze of the man sitting in it was directed thoughtfully towards it.

The silence that reigned in the room had something sacred about it, broken and underscored only by the man's quiet breathing.

Thomas Beckett's wealth had risen in direct proportion to the decline of that of the United States of America. The country, which for decades had been regarded as the epitome of economic prosperity, had begun to run colossal trade deficits from the mid-1980s onwards. It had gone from being the world's largest creditor nation to its largest debtor nation.

Its companies, once the largest and most powerful on earth, had long since lost their leading position and had eventually passed into the hands of the Japanese, Germans and others.

Wall Street experienced another boom, but it was a boom that was by no means based on real value any longer, but merely on the Potemkin village of share prices that bore no relation to a company's true strength.

The 1990s had shown that the American dream of boundless growth was a nightmare.

And what had to happen happened: shortly before the turn of the millennium , a crash—against which Black Friday of 1929 and the ensuing Depression seemed almost insignificant—shook the very foundations of the US economy and with it the last remnants of American illusions. And, as in every crisis, there had been a few speculators who had made a fortune from it.

Thomas Beckett was one of them. Although a US citizen, he was indifferent to what his country and its people had
. To him, borders were nothing more than, at best, demarcation lines between competing corporations. He played a game whose playing field was the globe, whose pieces were people, companies, raw materials, products and nations. The prize was wealth, but, even more than that, power. And he played the game at a time when the kings of gold had long since supplanted the dukes of war.

But Beckett was not one of those self-made men who had risen from dishwasher to billionaire. He came from a highly respected family on the East Coast that had been extremely wealthy for generations. Thanks to his above-average intelligence, he had graduated from Harvard at the top of his class. And although his fortune was
Although his wealth was colossal by ordinary standards, his name did not appear in the annual 'list' of the world's 500 richest people. Yet his power was greater than any position on that list could have conveyed. But there were reasons for this that had nothing to do with his fortune.

At that moment, Beckett's thoughts were elsewhere. A few hours earlier, thousands of kilometres away in Vienna, a man had been shot dead who had been his friend; more than that: a man who had been as close to him as a brother. But it was not merely the loss of a friend that Beckett mourned; it was the idea, far more powerful than either of them, that he now feared.

26

The intercom built into the videophone buzzed. Beckett turned his gaze away from the window and turned towards his desk.

His secretary's voice came over the line.

"Mr Kipling is here now, sir."

"Thank you, Vanessa. Please ask him to come up."

Beckett's study had no visible door. One reached the room directly via a spiral staircase leading upwards from a room next to his secretary's.

The staircase was situated in the front quarter of the room, opposite Beckett's desk, so that a visitor – still halfway up the stairs – would usually first look into Beckett's green eyes. To the right and left of this staircase stood, completely free-standing in the room, as if at the entrance to a temple, two stone columns of graceful simplicity, each about two and a half metres high.

Joe Kipling's massive frame, which weighed in at a hefty 110 kilos, huffed and puffed its way up the stairs. Even before his sweaty face came into view, Beckett could make out his thick, black curls at the top of the stairs. For Kipling, any physical exertion was a tiresome and arduous chore.

The man who ran the largest law firm in San Francisco was a prime candidate for a heart attack, not least because of the four dozen or so cigarettes he used to smoke every day.

"Hello, Thomas."

Kipling wiped the sweat from his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

“Hello, Joe. Please take a seat.”

He gestured towards the leather sofa set standing in a corner of the room.

Once Kipling had sunk into one of the armchairs, Beckett sat down too.

“I suppose you’ve already heard about it.”

Kipling got straight to the point. As he did so, he lit a cigarette.

“If you mean Volker’s death, yes.”

“Death? They killed him in cold blood! After Garakin’s murder, he’s number two. And I’m telling you, the killing will continue.”

The words just poured out of Kipling, though for him was by no means unusual. Whatever he did, he always gave the impression of being in a great hurry.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, Thomas. No doubt about it. Garakin was the Russian Minister of Economic Affairs, Volker the President of the European Central Bank. These aren’t targets just anyone can take on. It takes professionals, backed by a well-oiled organisation. Both were on our side, both are dead, and both had that damned mark branded on their foreheads.”

Kipling gasped for air and took a deep drag on his cigarette. Beckett looked at him thoughtfully.

“So you’re sticking to your theory, Joe?”

“What do you mean, theory? How many more of us have to die before you finally believe it?”

Beckett didn’t like his counterpart, although he acknowledged his abilities in certain areas.

But his self-discipline had never allowed him to show it. After all, there were more important things than personal animosities.

"Thomas, you know as well as I do that we’ve been expecting these people to crawl out of their holes again for decades. We had virtually nothing to go on, apart from the odd small sign here and there. We were never under any real pressure, and many of us believed that this nightmare
would never happen again. If they want to play along once more, they have to do it now. It’s their last chance. That’s why they’re striking. And that’s why it won’t stop at two deaths. Don’t you understand that?”

Beckett glanced briefly towards the window. His thoughts seemed to be elsewhere entirely. Then he pulled himself together and looked back at Kipling, whose lighter was just lighting his next cigarette.

“What makes you so sure?”

“There are no similarities between Garakin and Volker that would suggest the same terrorist group is behind the attacks. If it had been just one, there would have been reason enough. Garakin as the victim of some nationalist group in Russia.

Volker has become a target for the far left, who refuse to forgive him for the consequences of his monetary policy.

27

For example. But there is nothing that applies to both of them. Except that they both belonged to us.

But who else could have known that, and above all, who would have attributed any significance to it, had they known? And both had the black sun branded on their foreheads."

"Apart from the two murders, do you see any other signs that confirm your theory?"

"I admit that's a weak point. We know some of their sleeper agents, as you're aware. Most of them have now risen to
promising positions. But that's only about a dozen, too few to really make a difference. Organisational structures suggesting that things are starting up again are, with the best will in the world,
"I can't see any. Either we're blind – which, given our capabilities, I'd like to rule out for the moment – or they're still in their infancy. Still, we have to do something, Thomas!"

If only he knew what, thought Beckett. But Kipling was right. Something had to be done.

"All right, Joe. We'll convene the council. But that will take a week or two, as you know."

"Never mind. It's necessary in any case."

"But there's something else you might not know yet. In Garakin's case, we presented it as a crime of passion committed by his wife. It's a shame for her that she's now behind bars because of it. But with Volker, there's a small detail that could potentially become a problem."

Beckett went to his desk and picked up a piece of paper, which he held out to Kipling. The lawyer took it and realised it was a fax. It showed the front page of the *Blatt*.

"I don't know how it could have happened, but a journalist in Vienna has seen the body. He describes the mark that was branded onto Volker's forehead. Naturally, he'll want to find out more about its meaning and the background to the murder. That's just how that lot are. He'll need a hell of a lot of luck to come to even a few correct conclusions. But still, perhaps you could see to it that he's kept under observation. You do have excellent contacts in Austria, don't you?"

Kipling skimmed through Weigert's article. His German was good enough to grasp the content.

"I think that can be arranged."

"That alone won't be enough. The official police report must contain no reference to the symbol. That means you'll have to act quickly."

"But that also means we have to make sure everyone who saw the body keeps quiet."

"There can't be that many. Volker's secretary found the body. As far as I know, he's one of us too. So he's not a problem. Then there are the people from the Homicide Squad, those who took the body away, and the coroner. It must be possible. Because if the details of the murder become known, it won't just be one journalist chasing further information, but the whole pack. That wouldn't be in our interests."

Kipling thought for a moment.

"I think I have a solution."

"Whatever it is, I know I can rely on you."

Beckett knew that such flattery was sometimes necessary. With Kipling, it was even appropriate, even though he didn't like him.

“You certainly can. You’ll hear from me.”

Once Kipling had left, Beckett pressed the intercom to tell his secretary that he did not wish to be disturbed for the next hour. He walked to the back wall of the room and pressed a specific spot. A cupboard swung open to reveal the entrance to the room behind it. In the middle of the black marble floor was a red circle set into it, made of a different stone. In the centre of this lay a small cushion.

Once Beckett had entered, the secret door closed behind him. He settled himself on the cushion, crossed his legs, placed his hands on his thighs and closed his eyes.

28

Vienna, 20 November

He couldn’t get the symbol out of his head. Weigert had been trying late into the night yesterday and this morning to find out what the mark meant that had been branded onto the forehead of the murdered Eurofed President. There was still no claim of responsibility from any organisation for the assassination.

Weigert had spent many hours rummaging through the archives of *Der Blatt*, sifting through old newspaper articles and poring over books. He had made countless phone calls – to the police, to terrorism experts, to Middle East specialists, and with experts on left-wing and right-wing extremism. The result was a complete dead end. There had indeed been an attack on an American ambassador in Algiers around ten years earlier, in which something had also been burned into his forehead. But that lead had come to nothing, as the symbol had been completely different and

it had emerged a few months after the attack that it had been an act of personal revenge.

Then again, Weigert had doubted whether he was on the right track. Perhaps it wasn't a political murder at all? Perhaps Volker's motives were purely personal too? But after all, his two bodyguards had also been shot dead. They had been professionals; the two of them would certainly not have allowed themselves to be taken by surprise by an amateur.

What had irritated Weigert most, however, was that his enquiries with the police had hit a brick wall. It was certainly common practice to be extremely reticent officially regarding assassinations of such high-ranking figures as Volker until concrete leads were in hand. But usually there was still some informant within the authorities who would report on the progress of the investigation. This, of course, only on the assurance that they would not be quoted in the newspaper. This time, no one had come forward.

And it seemed that no other newspaper, no television or radio station, and no journalist from a news agency had found an informant either. In this small but important detail of the assassination, everyone relied solely on the 'Blatt', that is, on Weigert's observations through the open door of the hotel room. This time, the
information blackout, strangely enough, really seemed to be working.

In a few minutes, he would know more. The Minister of the Interior, together with the representative of the European Police in Vienna, had
press conference. Weigert had arrived at the European Police press centre – had its Austrian headquarters right next to the UN City. The hall was already almost full. Around 80

Up to 90 journalists from Germany and abroad, as well as numerous camera crews, had gathered.

Weigert knew many of his colleagues from similar events. There hadn't been such intense media interest for a long time.

“Hello, Mr Weigert.”

It was Dieter Steinberg from Austrian television. He was an editor and presenter on the major evening news programme. He was popular with viewers. But within the industry, he was regarded as an enfant terrible because of his arrogance.

“I read your article about the assassination attempt with interest, and I don’t think I was the only one. Since Eichler, whom we’d sent to the ‘Imperial’, had once again dropped the ball, we were unfortunately forced to quote you – or rather, the ‘Blatt’. You know how embarrassing something like that can be at times.”

“I was just lucky. That’s how the industry is: today it’s me, tomorrow it’s you.”

“Yes, of course. But tell me...”

Steinberg lowered his voice.

“No one wanted to confirm to me during my research what they had seen. Highly unusual, because people don’t usually turn us TV people down so easily, don’t you agree?”

‘I’d turn you down in a heartbeat,’ thought Weigert. Steinberg and most of his colleagues in television thought they were a cut above the rest and looked down their noses at newspaper journalists.

29

“And?” Weigert looked at him questioningly.

“Well, perhaps they told you a bit more…”

Of course that was what Steinberg was getting at. It was certainly common for people to support one another a little and exchange information. Especially when it didn’t involve direct competition. One hand washed the other. After all, you couldn’t always find out everything yourself. But he would never say anything to a TV bloke
like Steinberg would never say anything. Not at any price, even if he knew something.

“I’m sorry, Mr Steinberg. Everything I know, you can read in the ‘Blatt’.”

“You’re not exactly being cooperative.”

Weigert looked for a way to bring the conversation to a reasonably polite close. Events came to his aid.

Suddenly, the hall fell silent. The Home Secretary, followed by two senior officials, and the representative of the ‘Eurocops’ – as the European police were known – strode purposefully towards the tables set up at the front.

Steinberg ran over to his cameraman to give him instructions. But he, like many others, was already filming. All around, the photographers’ flashes were going off in a frenzy.

The four took their seats. Home Secretary Löser was the first to speak. After the usual brief greeting, he got straight to the point:

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have decided to provide you today with an overview of the state of the investigation into the assassination of the President of the European Central Bank, Bernhard Volker. Volker was shot dead on 18 November, together with his two bodyguards, at the Imperial Hotel in Vienna. All three men were killed with the same weapon. This is most likely a Heckler & Koch pistol, 9mm Parabellum calibre. Standard caseless

. There are no direct witnesses to the murder, nor is there any
No one heard any gunshots. This, together with ballistic analyses, suggests that a silencer was used. Despite a large-scale manhunt launched immediately, the perpetrator or perpetrators have not yet been apprehended. Unfortunately, a check of the hotel guests has so far yielded hardly any leads. The only result is the observation by an employee of the 'Imperial', who saw a man who, at the time of the incident –
at around 11.15 am –

left the hotel in great haste. The man is described as follows: approximately 1.80 metres tall, with blond hair.

According to the hotel employee, he was wearing a light-coloured coat. The bodies were discovered a few minutes later by Volkers' secretary, Mr Friedrich Helmstedt."

Home Secretary Löser relished such public appearances, particularly in front of the media.

His words were carefully chosen, his tone conveying competence and a clear grasp of the situation. The journalists took notes eagerly, the photographers snapped away, and the camera crews filmed.

Löser had saved the bombshell for the end of his statement. "A few hours ago,

we received a letter claiming responsibility.
It is signed by the Islamic People's Front, a fundamentalist terrorist group which, as you know, has already made its presence felt in Europe on several occasions. As far as we have been able to ascertain in the few hours since then, there is no doubt as to the authenticity of the letter, based on comparisons with previous letters of claim from the group. Consequently, our investigations are currently focusing on
these circles. The representative of the European Police in Vienna, Monsieur François Benoist, as well as my two colleagues and I are now available to answer any further questions."

Weigert was stunned. Löser had not said a word about the mark that had been branded onto Volker's forehead, not a word about what

had been gnawing at Weigert's mind for the past two days. And something else occurred to him: naturally, he too had looked into the Islamic People's Front during his research, yet their symbol looked completely
different from the one that had stuck in Weigert's mind when he had glanced through the hotel room door.

He saw the heads of some of his colleagues turn towards him. They expected him to take the lead. Weigert raised his hand to indicate that he wished to ask the minister a question.
Several other journalists had also raised their hands. Löser, who had been whispering briefly with Benoist, looked up as if searching for something in the room.

"Please, you first. Yes, there in the third row."

30

He pointed at Weigert. Was it a coincidence? It didn't matter; he couldn't think about that now. He had to ask his question.

"Minister, there was a symbol on the victim's forehead, which had presumably been branded onto it. This symbol depicts a sort of sun with twelve rays angled at its ends. Could you please explain to us the significance of this rather unusual act by the perpetrator or perpetrators? And secondly: to what extent is this symbol connected with the Islamic People's Front's claim of responsibility for the assassination?"

Everyone present seemed to have been waiting for this question.

“You’re Mr Weigert from *The Blatt*, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Quite right.”

“Well, I’ve read your articles. However, it’s unclear to me where you’re getting your information from. All I can say is this: none of the victims—neither Volker nor his two bodyguards—show any distinctive marks, apart from the gunshot wounds, that are connected to the assassination.”

Weigert was speechless. His visibly incredulous expression prompted Löser to press the point further.

“The reports of a burnt mark on the Eurofed President’s forehead are simply false.”

A murmur rippled through the hall. Out of the corner of his eye, Weigert saw the television reporter Steinberg smiling derisively.

31

> Vienna, 20 November

Heinz Tolmein pounded away at his computer keyboard. Watching him, one got the impression that he had a troubled relationship with the machine. It seemed as though he wanted to punish it, like a dominatrix punishing her slave. The more unruly it was and the more commands it defied,

the harder Tolmein hammered at the keyboard. The modern man within him knew that this treatment would not be successful.
The archaic Homo sapiens, on the other hand, demanded submission by force. He marched back and forth in Tolmein's line of sight, just as he was doing now, and rejoiced in his existence.

Weigert slammed the office door shut and flopped into his armchair. Tolmein paused the battle between man and machine.

"And? What did Löser have to say?"

"Complete rubbish."

"That wouldn't be anything new. Judging by the look on your face, it can't have been very pleasant."

Weigert rummaged through his folder for the notes. "Listen: that

mark Volker had on his forehead…" "What about it?"

"Löser claims that such a thing doesn't exist at all!"

Tolmein whistled through his teeth.

"That could get awkward." "What

do you mean?"

"If Löser or the police are lying and we can prove it, then they'll be left high and dry. If not, then we'll be the ones looking like fools."

"Someone ought to explain the meaning of the little word 'we' to you. Then I'll be the one looking like a fool!"

"Indirectly, yes. But first, the 'paper'. Then the boss will be in a right tizzy. And then he'll come after you."

Tolmein’s logic was unassailable.

“What are you planning to do now?”

"First of all, I’ll find someone who can corroborate my account. After all, I wasn’t the only one who saw Volker’s body. And then I need to find out what that mark on Volker’s forehead is all about."

“The first part won’t be easy. If Löser knows about it, he’ll have made sure no one else lets it slip. After all, he’s a minister. So he certainly has a few options open to him. If he was misinformed by his people, then you’ll have it a bit easier.”

“You’re forgetting a third possibility.”

“And that would be?”

“Perhaps they don’t want the investigation to be disrupted. Apparently, they’re following a concrete lead.”

“What sort of lead?”

“Löser has stated that a letter of claim from the Islamic People’s Front arrived this morning. He says the letter is authentic.”

"Why, then, does he want to keep Volker’s disfigurement a

secret?" "No idea."

The tormentor Tolmein turned his attention back to the object of his desire. Whenever he was in this mood, Weigert thought the keyboard would fall apart. But so far, Tolmein had managed to keep it intact.

“I’m going to Hillgruber’s to discuss the matter with him. Perhaps he’d like to write a comment on it.”

“Hillgruber isn’t here yet.”

As Tolmein said this, he didn’t look up. His features were grim. His fingers worked the keys relentlessly.

32

Weigert lit a cigarette. Someone had to confirm what he’d seen. He needed a witness whom he could quote – even if anonymously. Walter Müller had given him a glimpse of Volker’s body. Müller had seen it too. And he was his former schoolmate and friend.

Weigert reached for his electronic notebook to look up the phone number. First, he tried Müller’s office. He wasn’t there. He’d been on duty the night before and was therefore off duty. So he must be at home.

“Müller...”

The voice sounded sleepy.

“Hans Weigert here. Sorry to have woken you. But I’m afraid I need to ask you a few questions about the Volker case.”

“And if you let me win the next hundred games of snooker, the whole thing’s off the record.”

Müller’s voice was suddenly cheerful.

“You can’t be serious!?”

“But I am.”

“May I ask why?”

"No, you can’t. Or do you want me to lose my job?" That sounded pretty

serious.

“Listen, Walter. I promise you solemnly that I won’t mention your name to anyone in this context. It won’t appear in the paper and I won’t mention it to anyone in the editorial office either. Clear?”

"You're getting me into a right mess, Hans."

"You know what we both saw. I mean that strange mark on Volker’s forehead. Löser claimed an hour ago that it doesn’t exist. If he sticks to his story, everyone will think I’ve been imagining things. My boss will tear me to pieces, just as
competition will do with the 'Blatt'. Don’t you get it!?”

“I really can’t tell you anything—absolutely nothing—about what was going on with Volker’s body.”

“Walter, old chap. You can’t just leave an old schoolmate in the lurch like that, can you?”

There was silence at the other end of the

line. "Well? What is it?"

“You won’t be hearing anything from me about Volker’s body.”

Weigert was about to hang up. What an arsehole! But then Müller continued.

“I’m not allowed to say anything. Two lads from the UN secret service were here yesterday. As far as I’ve heard, they’ve grilled not just me, but everyone who saw Volker’s body

. And then they made everyone promise not to tell anyone about it.

Not about the body, not about the questioning. If we did, they said, there would be very serious consequences."

"Well, I'll be! That's quite a lot, isn't it."

"Promise me, Hans, that you won't tell anyone about this. And don't put it in the paper either, not even without my name. The circle of people who've seen the body is too small. Those arrogant, wannabe James Bonds from the UN would find out who gave you the information."

Weigert knew that Müller didn't think much of the United Nations' intelligence service.

It had been established a few years earlier. Its creation had been a consequence of the UN's significant rise in stature, as it took on more and more international responsibilities. The era of the Cold War, during which the superpowers had largely blocked the world organisation with their vetoes, was long gone. Now the United Nations was intervening with increasing influence across the globe.

In many countries, the UN intelligence service was increasingly overshadowing not only the national intelligence agencies but also the police. Its powers were very extensive. As a result, there were frequent clashes in Vienna between UN personnel and the Austrian authorities, as well as the European police. And Müller had found himself right in the thick of it on several occasions.

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But if Weigert now promised his school friend that he wouldn't write or say anything about it, what would he have gained from it?

"You must promise me that, Hans!"

What choice did he have? Firstly, Walter Müller was his friend, and secondly, any journalist would be ill-advised to stab his informant in the back. Because then he'd never get a tip-off again.

"All right, I promise."

"See if you can find out anything elsewhere. I'd be delighted if we could get one over on that arrogant cosmopolitan. And Löser too. Because, as we all know, the fish starts to stink from the head down
."

"I'll do my best. Thanks, Walter. The next round of beers at the snooker hall's on me."

"I'll get back to you on that."

Weigert hung up.

"What was that?"

Tolmein was starting to get on his nerves again. "Nothing

important."

"But that sounded quite different."

"Weren't you going to write your story?" "Never

mind."

His colleague fell silent and continued his battle with the technology.

Müller was right. Something was fishy. The fact that the UN secret service had got involved was, in itself, hardly surprising. Bernhard Volker had been an extremely important figure in international economic and political life. As President of the European Central Bank, an institution of the Political Union, the Eurocops would normally have been responsible. But following the letter of claim from the Islamic People's Front, the whole affair had taken on a dimension extending beyond Europe. So it was only logical that the United Nations should intervene.

What was anything but logical, however, was that the UN secret service conceal a certain detail of Volker's murder. What sense did that make?

And above all: how was Weigert to defend himself against the criticism that would undoubtedly follow? Hillgruber and the boss would demand proof of his story. After all, the 'Blatt's' reputation as a reputable newspaper was at stake. Not a promising outlook for him.

Weigert decided to continue his research into the meaning of this ominous symbol first. Perhaps that would help him make some progress. He began rummaging through the piles of newspaper clippings piled up on his desk.

piled up on his desk. In doing so, he found a book he had fetched from the archives yesterday: 'Allah's World Empire – Islamic Terror in Europe and the USA'. Weigert leafed through it.

The sound made by Tolmein, his fingers and his keyboard fell silent.

"You were here until after midnight yesterday, going through this stuff."

His colleague gestured towards Weigert's cluttered desk.

"And even if I read it through ten more times, that's none of your business!"

Couldn’t Tolmein spare him his grumbling for at least an hour?

"Now, now! Don’t get so worked up. You’re looking for the meaning of the symbol you saw at Volker’s."

“Thanks, I know what I’m doing.”

Tolmein ignored Weigert’s

annoyance.

“And you reckon that because it was a political assassination, you need to try your luck with terrorist groups. Is that right?”

“Extremely astute.”

“And in doing so, you’ve realised that the Islamic People’s Front, which Löser claims was responsible, has never used that symbol. Theirs looks completely different.”

“Yes.”

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Weigert sighed. When would Tolmein finally leave him in peace?

"I can recall something that might help you, and by extension 'Blatt'." "And what is that?"

He wasn't exactly interested in his colleague's remarks.

"A few months ago, we ran a special page on political symbolism in a supplement."

"We brought in a guest writer for that. I think he was a professor or lecturer at the University of Vienna. You could look for the page in the archive." Sometimes Tolmein was actually of some use. "You're having a good day today." "What do you mean, today?"

"I'll be in the archives if anyone's looking for me." "Who would be looking for you?"

"Professor Meciar?"

"Yes, please?"

Weigert had found exactly what he was looking for in the archive. Vaclav Meciar was a professor from Slovakia who taught history at the University of Vienna. He had written the article back then –

. Weigert had phoned him straight away.

"This is Hans Weigert from the *Blatt*."

"How can I help you, Mr Weigert?"

The voice, with its unmistakable accent, sounded friendly and cooperative.

"A few months ago, you wrote an article for us about political symbols. Now I'm facing a problem where I thought you might perhaps be able to help me."

"Here you are. What's this all about?"

"As you've no doubt read or heard, the President of the European Central Bank was murdered in Vienna. Some people are now claiming that a mark was branded onto his forehead."

“Oh, yes. I read your article, Mr Weigert. A terrible thing.”

"Quite right. Well, I haven’t made any progress with my research, as to my knowledge this symbol has not yet been used by any terrorist group or political organisation."

“Could you please describe this symbol to me again in detail? I did read your article, but I can’t quite remember it clearly enough.”

In his mind’s eye, Weigert saw Volker’s body lying in the doorway to the hotel room’s bathroom.

"So, there’s a solid circle in the centre. Twelve rays extend out from it at regular intervals. Each ray is bent twice by 90 degrees at its upper end. The whole thing is enclosed by another circle."

"Excuse me, Mr Weigert. Might I suggest that you sketch it out and send it to me by fax? That way we can avoid any misunderstandings."

"That’s a good idea. You’ll have it in a few minutes."

Weigert asked for the number. The professor promised to get in touch as soon as he’d found out anything.

Three hours and 52 minutes later, Weigert’s phone buzzed. Vaclav Meciar had found what he was looking for.

“Here it is.”

The professor handed Weigert a book that was already well-thumbed. In a plain black-and-white photograph, what Löser had denied—and what Weigert had been unable to get out of his head ever since—stared back at him.

The photograph had been taken in a large hall. In the background, one could see a door framed by two columns. The black sun, as Weigert had called it, was set into the floor here as an ornament. It took up more than half of the image, which spanned the entire page of the book.

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Weigert read the caption: "The Gruppenführer Hall with its artistic floor ornamentation. This image clearly illustrates the circular layout of the hall. The significance of the number 12 remains unclear to this day; it recurs, for example, in the twelve spokes of the sun wheel, the twelve columns and niches of the
Gruppenführer Hall, and in the twelve pedestals in the Walhalla."

No doubt about it, it was the symbol that had been branded on the Eurofed president's forehead.

"This is a book about the SS school in Wewelsburg. The volume is a good twenty years old."

Weigert examined the cover. "Himmler's Fortress" was written on it in red letters. The author was a certain Pierre Martin.

"How did you come across it?"

"When I saw the fax with your drawing, I knew it must be a sun wheel. The sun wheel is a symbol dating back thousands of years. It can be found in its various forms in numerous cultures. As you have drawn it for me, it seemed to me a

to be a symbol from recent history. Since the swastika—a variation of the sun wheel—gained notoriety under the Nazis, that is where I began my search. At first I found nothing, as the NSDAP party emblem and later symbol of the Third Reich looks quite different. I was just about to move on to the South American indigenous cultures when an assistant drew my attention to this book. He had only read it recently."

Weigert was confused. Himmler and the SS – naturally, these were terms he was familiar with. After all, his school history lessons hadn't left him entirely unaffected. But what did that and this castle have to do with Volker's murder?

"Do you perhaps know anything about this... Wewelsburg?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr Weigert. My specialism is the Middle Ages. I'm afraid I can't be of much help with such details of contemporary history."

"Would you mind if I borrowed the book for a few days?"

"Please, do go ahead. Hardly anyone needs it here anyway." "Thank you very

much, Professor. You've been a great help to me."

Help, yes, but Weigert wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

Back in the editorial office, he got back on the phone. Twenty minutes later, he had the author's address. A call to the publisher who had brought out the book – and who, fortunately, still existed – had been enough. Pierre Martin, a Frenchman, as the publisher's secretary had explained, lived right in Wewelsburg. The small town that had given "Himmler's Fortress" its name lay in the middle of Germany, around 60 kilometres west of Kassel and about 15 kilometres south of Paderborn.

It was a highly obscure lead that Weigert had there, but it was his only one. So what choice did he have but to follow it up?

> Wewelsburg, 21 November

“Would you like some more cake, Mr Weigert?”

Pierre Martin’s wife looked at him expectantly and held out her plate to him. She was a little plump, in her early sixties, with a warm, welcoming air that reminded Weigert of his mother.

“Please, I’d love some.”

Immediately after obtaining Pierre Martin’s address, Weigert had gone to see Hillgruber. At first, Hillgruber had hesitated to send him on a business trip to Wewelsburg for such a “trifling matter”, as he had put it. Weigert had been disappointed, but then he had at least managed to get Hillgruber to grant him two days’ leave.

He had left the editorial office earlier than usual, read Martin’s book late into the night, and taken the first plane from Vienna to Frankfurt that morning. There he had hired a car and driven to Wewelsburg.

When he thought of the cost of the whole venture, he felt uneasy. If nothing came of it, he would have to pay for it out of his own pocket. That was the agreement Weigert had made with Hillgruber. But he was optimistic—or at least he told himself he was.

A pleasant warmth washed over Weigert as he took a sip from the cup sitting on the table in front of him. He could really do with that coffee now. After all, he’d had little more than four hours’ sleep.

“If I’ve understood you correctly, you’d like to know a bit more about Wewelsburg?”

Pierre Martin spoke perfect German, although his French origins were easily discernible from his accent. He was 77 years old and had been living in Germany since 1972. Weigert had learnt this whilst Martin's wife was making the coffee.

"Yes, that's quite right. I read your book yesterday—or rather, skimmed through it. The circumstances in which I came across it are somewhat peculiar. It concerns the murder of the President of the European Central Bank, Bernhard Volker. You've surely read about it in the newspapers or heard about it on the television?"

Martin was a little taken aback. He ran his right hand over the few strands of hair still covering his head.

"Yes, I've heard a bit about it in passing. But I can't
"I don't quite understand what this has to do with my book and Wewelsburg."

"There are reports that Volker had a mark branded onto his forehead."

Weigert assumed that Martin hadn't followed the matter particularly closely. Especially here in Germany, he would hardly know that *Der Blatt* was the only newspaper to have reported on it directly, whilst all other media had merely quoted Weigert on the matter.

"When I was researching what this symbol might mean, a professor at the University of Vienna drew my attention to your book. It contains a photograph of a hall in Wewelsburg, in the floor of which this very symbol is embedded. That is why I am here."

Martin's eyes fixed on Weigert.

"As far as I know, only your newspaper reported on this rather peculiar aspect of the assassination. All the others merely referred to it. Is that correct?"

Martin seemed to be following things more than just casually – as he himself put it.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“And now you expect me to be able to help you?” “I certainly

hope so.”

“Let’s go for a short walk after coffee. If you don’t mind, I’ll show you the castle. That way you can see for yourself and ask your questions.

However, I can’t promise that it will help you with your research.”

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They walked slowly across the bridge into the castle courtyard. Martin had put on a black beret. As he walked, he leaned on the
A Frenchman on a walking stick. An old knee injury, as he put it, had forced him to do so. Weigert didn’t want to ask any further, as he wasn’t interested, but Martin told him of his own accord.

“I was hit by a bullet in Algeria.” “In Algeria?”

Weigert looked at him questioningly.

“Yes, before I came to Germany, I was an officer in the French army. Some Algerians didn’t particularly like that.” Martin smiled.

“I thought you were a historian?”

“If by that you mean I have a university degree, I’m afraid I must disappoint you.

You can safely call me an amateur historian. After I left the army, I started writing books. At first, it wasn’t easy to make a living from it. But I was lucky enough to inherit a little. That helped me make ends meet until my books started to sell properly.”

The Frenchman adjusted his beret. “Come on, here’s

the entrance.”

Weigert and Martin entered one of the castle’s buildings through a large gate. The castle had been beautifully restored, as Weigert had already seen from the outside.

Its triangular layout was bordered by a tower on each side: two smaller ones on the west and east sides, and a larger one to the north. The castle, like the small village named after it

had formed around it, was built on a small hill overlooking the Almetal valley. Its unusual triangular shape resulted from the natural topography: a limestone outcrop, which had presumably inspired the construction of defensive structures as far back as prehistoric times, jutted out into the valley. However, evidence of a hill fort could only be traced back to the ninth century.

The complex in its present form had been built between 1604 and 1607.

But the castle’s ancient history, which Weigert had already gleaned from Martin’s book, interested him only marginally. He wanted to know more about its more recent past.

“How did Himmler actually come to choose this castle?”

“Well, the National Socialists’ seizure of power had consequences not only for Germany and, subsequently, for the whole world, but

Wewelsburg was affected by it very soon.” Martin

explained as they strolled through the corridors.

"In November 1933, Heinrich Himmler visited the site; at that time, he was searching for a suitable location for a kind of spiritual centre for his SS. He was delighted and decided to
restore Wewelsburg, which was in a rather dilapidated state at the time. It is said that one of your compatriots was also involved in the selection of Wewelsburg, a certain Colonel Wiligut, who was known in the SS, however, under the name Weisthor – a highly
dubious character. He is said to have possessed a kind of second sight and to have recommended this place to Himmler. But what is one to make of such stories?

The plan was ultimately for a huge complex, an SS town, of which the castle itself would have been only a small part, albeit its centre. Part of the complex was to have taken the shape of a spear, the northern tower of the castle forming its tip. However, with the exception of the restoration, these plans were never realised due to the war.”

"You spoke of a spiritual centre for the SS. What do you mean by that?"

Weigert was eager to find out more. The thrill of the chase had gripped him. He wanted his story and he believed he was well on the way to getting it.

"As you are probably aware, the SS – at least in its original conception – was something of an order. Wewelsburg was intended to become its ideological centre par excellence. In 1935, work began on establishing a library. At first there were only a few hundred books, but the collection quickly grew: prehistory, protohistory and early history, sections on religion and mythological research, as well as art, literary and legal history. In 1939, a certain Bernhard Frank took over as head of the library. However, shortly after the outbreak of war, he left Wewelsburg, eventually becoming commander of the

Waffen-SS units at Hitler's Obersalzberg. After several other staff members were also called up for military service, 38

this effectively marked the end of work on the library. In addition, there was the establishment of a prehistoric and early history museum under Wilhelm Jordan. In this context, several archaeological excavations were carried out in the vicinity of the castle. Oh yes, and then there was the genealogist Rudi Bergmann. He worked on compiling various family trees."

Martin paused. They had just entered the group leader's room on the upper floor of the north tower.

"Here is what you're looking for."

So there it was: the symbol that had prompted Weigert's visit was, just as he had seen in the photograph, set into the floor in the middle of the hall. Weigert stopped and stared at it.

"What does it actually mean?"

Weigert had hoped that the question would solve his mystery. But Martin had to disappoint him.

"No one knows exactly what it's doing here in this hall. Without a doubt, like the swastika, it represents a sun wheel. But this shape, with its twelve spokes, is nowhere else to be found in the Nazi era
. Nor does it appear anywhere else in the castle. The only thing I've noticed is the repeated occurrence of this number – twelve – in other parts of the castle."

The end of the line, thought Weigert. Three days ago, the Eurofed president had been shot dead. And now he was rummaging through things that dated back decades. Where was the link? Or did it not exist at all?

“Do you think it’s possible that some right-wing extremists murdered Volker and used this symbol in the process?”

“I should really be asking you that, Monsieur Weigert. You’re the journalist of the two of us, after all.”

"I’m just an amateur historian. Whatever I want to know about politics, I get from the newspapers."

Martin was right: it was up to Weigert to sort these things out. But what motive could a few right-wing extremist hotheads possibly have for killing the President of the European Central Bank? An assassination of that magnitude would require
efficient organisation. Weigert knew of no group on this side of the political and terrorist spectrum that could be trusted to carry out such a thing. An arson attack on an asylum seekers’ home, yes. But the murder of such a well-known and important figure?

Martin snapped him out of his thoughts.

“Come along, I’ll show you, so to speak, the heart of Wewelsburg, the Valhalla.”

Weigert followed him. They stepped out of the building, crossed the castle courtyard, and finally left the complex via the bridge spanning the former moat. A narrow path led from the
outside of the castle to the north tower, the entrance to which was clearly below the level of the inner courtyard.

The door was locked, but Martin had his own key, which the council had given him. After all, he had been involved with Wewelsburg for decades and was on first-name terms with almost everyone in the small town who had anything to do with it.

After Martin had unlocked the door, the two of them descended a narrow staircase into the tower’s basement. A small barred gate
blocked the entrance to the room beyond. But the Frenchman had a key for that too. He stepped in ahead of Weigert and switched on the

lamps mounted on the walls inside. The journalist followed him.

A huge vaulted cellar, dome-shaped, perhaps ten or fifteen metres in diameter and about the same height, came into view.

Martin explained.

“The hall has been carved directly out of the natural rock. No one knows exactly what the SS

served its purpose. After this room was refurbished, entry to the Walhalla was restricted to a very small circle of people. Incidentally, the term ‘Walhalla’ does not originate from the SS, as one might assume. It is simply the name used colloquially here in Wewelsburg."

“But surely there must be at least some speculation as to what went on here?”

Weigert looked at Martin expectantly. Martin scrutinised him, as if pondering what he should tell Weigert now.

“Yes, of course. There is speculation. Some people say that Himmler wanted to be buried here.

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But due to the events, it never came to that. Others, again, speak of some sort of cult rituals. But as I said, these are speculations. Nothing a serious historian could rely on.”

Was Martin keeping something to himself? He did provide precise historical information when asked, but whenever the conversation strayed beyond the bare facts, it seemed as though he was putting up a wall. It might be that speculation held no interest for him, a man of history. Yet for Weigert, the man of journalism, these were also of interest. But perhaps Martin simply had blinkers on, Weigert thought. Like an absent-minded professor who was solely absorbed in his subject of study and simply failed to notice anything beyond it.

“Is anyone there?”

The voice came, muffled by the thick walls, from the door at the top of the stairs.

“Excuse me, please. Surely some tourists who also want to visit the Walhalla.”

Martin hobbled upstairs, leaning on his stick.

Weigert looked around. The room was circular. On the wall were several stone platforms, each about forty centimetres high. He began to count: one, two, three,... twelve. As many as the spokes on the sun wheel in the Group Leader’s Hall. In the centre was a circular depression, like a sort of well, about seven metres in diameter, Weigert estimated. One could just about climb down over the edge, as if over a step that had turned out too large. Something must once have stood in the centre of this depression. That was quite clear to see. The spot was now, instead of being covered with the stone slabs usual in the room, filled with concrete.

Weigert walked over to it and bent down to examine the floor more closely. But he couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary. There was only the rough surface of the concrete. When he stood up, he was standing right in the centre of the vault. That was when it happened.

Weigert had sighed, partly out of disappointment at having discovered nothing of significance, partly because of his tiredness, which had now become painfully apparent to him once more. Suddenly there was a ringing in his head. In

a single blow, he felt completely weightless. His body seemed to be nothing more than a weightless, insignificant shell. It felt as though his skull were expanding into the infinite.

Startled, Weigert paused. The sensation grew fainter, though it did not cease entirely. He tentatively uttered another sound. There it was again! A step to the side, another sound.

Nothing. Weigert stood exactly in the centre again. The effect was as striking as before.

His fear subsided somewhat. He had already experienced quite a few acoustic phenomena in buildings in churches, which he always enjoyed visiting on his travels. But this surpassed everything. Weigert was overcome by an uneasy feeling, not fear, but rather something that made him aware of his own smallness and insignificance. Was that what they had wanted to show the SS men here? An acoustic trick? Or had it been more than that? Weigert wasn't sure. He preferred to leave the vault.

Outside, in front of the entrance to the tower, Martin was standing and talking to a man, presumably the one who had called out first. The man was in his mid-forties. In his elegant grey suit, he looked like a wealthy businessman.

When Weigert joined them, Martin had just said goodbye.

"Just as I thought: a tourist who wanted to see the vault. I told him to join the next guided tour. It starts in fifteen minutes anyway."

Martin paused briefly to rummage for his keys in his trouser pocket.

"So, did you discover anything else?"

Weigert hesitated.

“No, nothing of significance.”

“But you must have noticed the small opening up there on the wall, right on the north side?”

Now Weigert remembered. A rectangular hole had been cut into the thick wall of the tower. When he had looked around, he had seen that the sky was visible through it.

But he hadn’t paid it any further attention. “A little trick

by the architect.”

Martin smiled.

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“Every few years, when the winter solstice coincides with the full moon, a beam of moonlight falls right into the centre of the vault. Provided, of course, there are no clouds.”

Once Martin had finished, the two set off on their way back. As they passed the bridge leading over the moat again, the old Frenchman pointed to the left.

“That building houses the sad side of Wewelsburg. Back then, they needed workers for the restoration. To do this, they used prisoners from a concentration camp. A branch of that camp was located over there.”

Martin pointed in that direction.

“You can’t see any trace of it now. A museum has been set up in that building, where this side of Wewelsburg is explored in more detail.”

‘Those bastards,’ thought Weigert. ‘They couldn’t even build Himmler’s grave on their own.’

Weigert turned the car round and drove slowly out of the village. The sun was just beginning to disappear behind a range of hills. Its light bathed them in a murky, dark orange-red. To his left lay the castle, of which he could now make out only the outlines, majestic and yet somewhat menacing. If it held a secret connected to Weigert’s story, it had kept it safe.
But Weigert hardly believed in it anymore. The attempt to bridge the past and the present had failed. He was so lost in thought that he did not notice a car following him at a respectful distance.

41

Vienna, 22 November

“As you know, I have always held your work in high regard. Not least, this appreciation is reflected in every first payment into your account. But this time, dear Weigert, it looks very much as though you are about to deal the ‘Blatt’ a major blow.”

Weigert shifted somewhat uneasily in his armchair, which – normally intended for visitors – stood in front of the editor-in-chief’s desk, which was in a complete state of chaos cluttered desk of the editor-in-chief. ‘The Short One’, as the editorial staff called him, seemed to be having a good day today, however

. For if that had not been the case, Dr Karl Bergmann would have been shouting at the top of his voice long ago.

The editor-in-chief was known for his hot temper, but that was only one side of his nature. He could just as easily be friendly and jovial, even genuinely funny. As mentioned, today was one of his good days. Weigert secretly hoped he wouldn't have to have another conversation like this on one of his boss's bad days.

"I had lunch with the Home Secretary today."

Bergmann was a man of this world who took great pleasure in the finer things in life. He was a welcome and frequent guest at the city's finest restaurants.

"As you know, I am on very good personal terms with the Minister. And as you also know, Löser has already done me – and thus the 'Blatt' – such
"He'd managed to glean some useful information that he could never have officially blurted out."

Weigert grew even more uneasy. He knew how important Bergmann's connections in politics, business and culture were to him. Not so much because they were good for the 'paper', as he liked to claim, but above all because they bolstered his ego. 'The Short One' needed to be surrounded by the people who made things happen in this country in order to reassure himself of his own importance.

Weigert was well aware that this was not the ideal moment to contradict him. Bergmann's mood could change too quickly. And he had often felt the consequences of that during his time working for this newspaper.

"You claim to have seen something that no one else has seen. The Home Secretary confirmed it to me again over dinner: the mark that, according to your version, was supposedly branded onto Volker's forehead simply does not exist. Do you know what that means for the 'Blatt'

?"

“But...”

Weigert was about to launch into a defence. A brief wave of the hand from the editor-in-chief signalled to him that, at least for the time being, nothing would come of it.

“Hillgruber had you carry out some research in Germany. Yet, as he told me today, your findings amounted to nothing. Your agreement with Hillgruber was that, in such a case, you would have to cover the travel expenses. To show you that I still value your enthusiasm, you may consider this agreement null and void. The ‘Blatt’ will cover the costs.

But...”

Bergmann paused briefly to lend his words the necessary weight.

“In future, I only want to read in our newspaper about this murder case what is absolutely watertight. We simply cannot afford to get it so wrong. And you don’t want that either, do you?”

“No, of course not.”

Weigert knew he could save himself the trouble of defending himself. Engaging in a rational discussion was not exactly one of his boss’s strong points. And what could he possibly say anyway? Was he supposed to regurgitate to Bergmann what had already appeared in the newspaper? Or was he supposed to tell him again about Wewelsburg, which his department head had already done anyway? The boss was right: to the outside world, the whole thing looked like a classic newspaper hoax. But he wasn’t mad! He had seen something that others wanted to pretend didn’t exist. He just couldn’t prove it. And he couldn’t
offer no explanation as to what significance it held, if any at all. Even his visit to Wewelsburg had not helped him in that regard.

42

For a moment, Weigert considered telling Bergmann about what his police friend Müller had said. But firstly, he had promised to keep it to himself, and secondly, his boss
confront the Home Secretary with it at the very latest at the next dinner. That could get Müller into serious trouble, even if Weigert
kept Müller's name to himself.

Weigert decided to get the conversation over with as quickly as possible. This was entirely in line with his boss's wishes, as he too wanted to bring the conversation—which had been a monologue anyway—to an end.

"Right then, Mr Weigert, pull yourself together. The 'Blatt' has always been a reputable newspaper and will continue to be so. What we report had better be accurate."

With that, Weigert was dismissed.

"So, did you survive?"

"As you can see, yes."

On Tolmein's desk lay a paper plate with a hamburger on it. He had just taken a hearty bite, so that his words were underscored by fine traces of the meal falling from his mouth onto the table. He had just put a can to his lips to take a sip of cola. He burped to express his contentment.

Sometimes Weigert thought his colleague had never eaten anything that didn't taste of plastic or chemicals. He was the aesthetic embodiment of modern eating habits, assuming that aesthetics also had dimensions that lay beyond the merely beautiful and good.

Erich Klement, his other office colleague, was also present. Klement had his legs up on the table and was inhaling the smoke from his cigarette with relish.

"What about your story, Hans? Hillgruber said your research yesterday wasn't exactly fruitful."

"You could certainly see it that way."

Klement had been told to be on his guard. He was a favourite of Bergmann's, a position he had skilfully built up through sycophancy and scheming.

"I did an interview with the Foreign Secretary today. He gave me a real dressing-down about your articles on the Volker assassination. No offence, Hans. But if we keep running this sort of sensationalist rubbish, this paper's reputation will soon be in
down the drain."

Weigert knew Klement all too well. In principle, he didn't care about the paper's reputation. But if he saw a chance to snitch on Weigert to the boss, he'd do it without a doubt. If you couldn't shine yourself, you just had to throw mud at others.

"What do you mean, sensationalist stories! Do you think I'm writing rubbish that's simply not true!?"

Weigert was now almost shouting. Tolmein carried on chewing his burger. "I

didn't say that. But we're all already on
We fell for unsubstantiated rumours. But we reported it as a rumour. You, on the other hand, present something like that as fact, and in

such an important matter. And we all have to justify ourselves to politicians for it, too."

Weigert sat down silently at his computer. Klement wasn't the only one who had begun to doubt his work. Bergmann had also made it clear to him that he didn't think much of it, and even Hillgruber had pulled a sour face when Weigert had told him this morning about his fruitless research at Wewelsburg.

That was actually the worst thing for a journalist: when he could no longer count on the full backing of his own newspaper; when it was no longer prepared to shield him from the interference of outsiders who disagreed with his investigations.

That was exactly the situation Weigert now found himself in. His reputation was at stake, both at the 'Blatt' itself and in the public eye. A journalist whom people believed would distort or even invent stories would react with the utmost reserve. Many a source from which Weigert had previously obtained important information would now turn their back on him. And ultimately, his job was also at stake.

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Bergmann wouldn't hesitate for long if it were necessary to restore the newspaper's reputation. He'd rather be everybody's darling than listen for too long to the complaints of his political friends about the reporting in the "Blatt".

But Weigert wasn't going to make it that easy for them. He wasn't mad, not yet. A mark had been branded onto Volker's forehead; there was no doubt about that. He, Hans Weigert, had seen it. Walter Müller had confirmed it. And he had also confirmed that there were people who wanted to keep it a secret. Why on earth?

He had to find out, and not just for the sake of the report. The story was slowly beginning to draw him in.

44

>• San Francisco, 22 November

"This Viennese journalist seems to be causing us more trouble than we had anticipated."

Joe Kipling had gone to see Thomas Beckett to update him on the progress of his efforts.

"I've been in touch with the UN intelligence service in Vienna. As you know, we have close ties with quite a few of the heads of the World Intelligence Service."

Kipling lit his next cigarette, the third since he had entered Beckett's office. He was sweating, as he always did when he was agitated. Beckett looked at him, and for a brief moment, displeasure flashed in his eyes.

"The UN people have put this Weigert under the
. It seems he's onto something. We don't know how he managed it, but he was at Wewelsburg."

Kipling looked at Beckett, but when the latter raised his eyebrows questioningly, the lawyer went on to provide further explanations.

"Wewelsburg Castle is in Germany and – now this is where it gets interesting – during the Nazi era it was intended to become the ideological centre of the SS ."

Beckett's eyes remained calm, but his mind was racing. Things seemed to be heating up.

"What was Weigert doing there?"

Beckett's head tilted slightly forward, not much, but enough to betray his growing excitement.

"That's the crux of the matter."

Kipling was practically tripping over himself with eagerness to tell his counterpart.

"He visited the castle just like any ordinary tourist. But he didn't go alone. A certain Pierre Martin accompanied him. Martin is French and lives in the village next to the castle. He's an amateur historian and, as such, has written a number of books, including one about Wewelsburg Castle."

The portly lawyer pulled his handkerchief from his trousers and dabbed the sweat from his forehead. As he did so, he continued speaking. "I immediately had our systems checked to see if we had anything on Martin. Of course we did. After all, his hobby alone is enough to warrant a file on him."

"Wewelsburg Castle… Now I remember. It was supposed to become one of the centres back then, of course. But what significance does it have today?"

"Ninety-nine per cent of the time, none whatsoever. It's a perfectly ordinary tourist destination. Right next to it is a concentration camp museum. That's all. Our esteemed

friends would be bloody stupid if they went to places like that."

"You say 99 per cent. What about the remaining one per cent?" "That is

precisely the point that worries me. I have arranged for
Martin is being scrutinised more closely, without him realising it, of course. The UN people have been going through his books. They've made enquiries with the publishers who brought them out. They've been asking around a bit in Wewelsburg under various pretexts. But there's nothing there of any significance to us. And then they had the idea of searching the central flight booking system to track down any trips Martin might have taken. That's not exactly straightforward, and the data retention policies don't allow for a complete audit either. But they've stumbled upon something despite everything. And
that's what worries me. Martin was in Tibet for about two weeks in June."

Beckett drew his head back. "Tibet. So that's it..."

"Yes, and I suppose I don't need to explain to you what that might mean."

"Have you arranged for investigations to be carried out in Tibet?"

"Of course. It's already underway. But, to be honest, I'm rather pessimistic that it will yield any useful results. After all, what sort of traces could Martin possibly have left behind there?"

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He grabs a couple of Sherpas and sets off. And tracking down those Sherpas now, four months later, is virtually impossible."

"Joe, do you think it's possible that this Martin was in Tibet purely by chance? I mean, just as a tourist?"

"In principle, that's a possibility, of course. But what would a 77-year-old man be doing there? After all, Tibet isn't exactly Hawaii. And then there's his research on Wewelsburg..."

Beckett tilted his head back and gazed at the ceiling of his office, as if he might find the solution there.

"So you think this journalist may have found a lead that could be of significance to us as well?"

"Yes, I believe so. But the lead isn't Wewelsburg; it leads via Martin to Tibet. The Frenchman could certainly tell us more about it."

"Does Weigert know anything about this?"

"Hard to say. In any case, he hasn't written anything about it yet. I, for one, would be very surprised if Martin had told him anything of significance. Even the book he wrote about Wewelsburg contains absolutely nothing of relevance. Even if Martin really does know something, he probably has no interest in seeing it published."

"Do you have any suggestions as to how we should proceed?" Kipling had

anticipated the question.

"Well, I think we're dealing with two obvious problems for the time being: this journalist and Martin. The journalist might become a nuisance, but ultimately he's a small fry. No matter what he uncovers, he'll never be able to grasp what's really going on here. However, to avoid any potential difficulties,

his editor-in-chief sort everything out. As a phone call to Vienna revealed, he too is a link in the chain, albeit an
insignificant

one.” “And

Martin?”

"If we want to find out more about him, we’ll probably have to, well... question him. Depending on what he says, we’ll take it from there."

“Wouldn’t it be better if we waited a little longer? Perhaps Martin will lead us to our goal?”

Kipling shook his massive head vigorously.

“Garakin is dead, Volker is dead. If things are as I suspect, we’ve run out of time. We have to do something, Thomas!”

Beckett stood up and looked down at Kipling.

“Very well. But I want you to take personal charge of this.”

“All right. I’ll fly to Europe today. You’ll hear from me.”

46

Vienna, 25 November

The editor-in-chief of the "Blatt" had just fetched his coat when he heard a voice behind him calling his name. He turned round to look for the person calling.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t greet you earlier. How are you, Doctor?”

The tall, gaunt figure strode towards him, finally coming to a halt just in front of him. Hans-Jörg Schneider held out his hand. Bergmann took it.

“Oh, thank you, I can’t complain.”

Bergmann forced a smile. It wasn’t easy for him. For whenever he met Schneider, he felt somewhat uncomfortable. He was a powerful man in the country, more powerful than his role as a board director of Austria’s largest bank would suggest.

“How is your lovely wife?”

"Better than me, it seems. She’s been nagging me about her wishes. You know, the latest autumn fashions."

Schneider laughed.

“Yes, yes, it’s no different for me. How similar things are.”

Bergmann had to lift his head to look into the angular face of his counterpart, who stood at nearly two metres tall. The two men were the perfect embodiment of opposites. The tall, slender bank director drew his authority from his charisma. He could easily have been used in an advert for his institution.
Dynamic and successful, the slogan might well have read. He was a man one trusted to get things done, who knew how to inspire loyalty because he embodied competence and upward mobility.

Bergmann, on the other hand, a man of small stature, usually hid behind his position. After all, he was the editor-in-chief of one of the country’s most reputable newspapers. And he always presented himself as such. When that proved of no use, he was helpless. Here, in this place,
it was of no use. For the hierarchies from the outside world held no sway within these halls. A different order of precedence applied here, one that corresponded to the real power. Schneider stood above Bergmann, and Bergmann, stripped of the shield of his professional position, was at a loss.

“Your newspaper has taken a somewhat
unconventional line in its reporting, if I may put it that way.”

Bergmann’s embarrassment grew. He had been asked about it several times over the last few days. And each time, his annoyance with Hans Weigert had increased. The editor-in-chief attempted a smile.

“You’re not the first person to say that to me. But unfortunately, that’s the way it is: even the best journalists sometimes make mistakes.”

Bergmann hated having to defend Weigert. But what was printed in the *Blatt* was, after all, closely linked to the name of its editor-in-chief.

“I see. But I’m sure I’m right in assuming that this isn’t exactly pleasant for a newspaper as reputable as the

‘Blatt’ isn’t exactly pleasant. The paper is, in a way, practically a pillar of the state, isn’t it?”

Bergmann shifted from one foot to the other, like a schoolboy caught stealing cherries.

“I’ve already given Hans Weigert, who was investigating the case, a good telling-off. I think he’s realised he made a mistake.”

The editor-in-chief’s mind was racing through the options available to bring this unpleasant conversation to an end. But Schneider thwarted his plans and pulled him aside confidentially.

"That is exactly what I wanted to discuss with you. I have spoken to a few brothers in the US and at the United Nations here in Vienna about it. They thought it would probably be better to let the matter rest. A man like Weigert – and I am merely relaying the opinion

of my friends, could cause a great deal of harm with his fantasies."

Now Bergmann knew which way the wind was blowing. Nothing could be simpler.

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Weigert was a thorn in his side anyway. And after all, the
His counterpart's friends – even if he didn't know them all personally – were his friends too. Sometimes requests were simply put to him, the newspaperman, in this way. It had never occurred to him to turn them down, even if he hadn't understood their purpose. And on occasion
he too had benefited from these connections. Service and consideration in return, ultimately for the good of all, not just those directly involved. Bergmann had often thought about it, but he could see nothing wrong with it. It was a matter of a greater, noble cause. The ways in which it was achieved might well remain in the dark.

"I shall speak to Weigert once more, and I hope a satisfactory solution can be found."

Bergmann ran his hand awkwardly over his head. He hoped he had satisfied his counterpart.

"Thank you, Doctor. It would be a shame if a journalist as good as Mr Weigert were no longer acceptable to the 'Blatt' because of his unscrupulous reporting. Don't you agree?"

Did that mean he was supposed to sack Weigert if he continued to ? Bergmann was a little confused. After all, he didn't want to make a mistake when it came to Schneider's wishes.

"In what circumstances would you consider a man like Weigert to be no longer tenable, Mr Schneider?"

"A difficult question. I don't know anything about the newspaper business and naturally don't want to interfere. But I could imagine that if certain aspects of the Volker assassination were constantly being brought up again..."

"You mean the business with the mark that, according to Weigert at least, was supposedly branded onto Volker?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"I see. But I can assure you, it won't happen. Weigert has clearly crossed the line of what is still acceptable for the *Blatt*. As I said before: I've made it clear to him that we can't afford such sensationalist stories."

"I am delighted to see that a newspaper as important to the country as *The Blatt* is in such capable and responsible hands as yours."

Bergmann's posture straightened. The smile now came a little more easily to him than before.

Schneider shook the editor-in-chief's hand.

"Goodbye, Doctor. It was nice chatting with you. Please give my regards to your wife."

"Thank you, likewise. Goodbye."

Certain requests simply could not be refused, Bergmann knew that. And as far as this Weigert was concerned, it didn't bother him in the slightest that he was the object of these wishes. After all, there were limits, even in

journalism and especially for the ‘Blatt’. Bergmann put on his coat and stepped through the gate onto Rauhensteingasse.

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> Wewelsburg, 26 November

The car’s digital clock read 7.33 pm. Night had already spread its cloak of darkness over the landscape. Only the headlights cut through the blackness, making the rain-soaked road glisten. Weigert had turned on the heating, as it had become quite cold.

There was no news in the investigation into the assassination of Volker. Consequently, the coverage of it had also died down, slipping from the front page of the “Blatt” further back and shrinking considerably in terms of coverage. There was also nothing really worth writing about. “The investigation is ongoing,” said the police, which meant as much as: “We have no leads.”

The only relevant development was that a successor to the murdered Eurofed president had been appointed. But a colleague of Weigert’s from the business desk had already written about that. The editor-in-chief had given him the assignment.

Weigert had used the lull in the case to take a week's holiday. During this time, he didn't intend to relax, but to continue his investigations on his own. He was on edge, because this was no longer just about a story, but about his reputation. And he wanted that restored. The problem was that he hadn't told anyone about his plan. He'd done something like this before, though back then without the underlying pressure of having to clear his name of supposed mistakes.

A few years ago, he had been the only European journalist to manage to penetrate civil war-torn China. Everyone at the 'Blatt' had believed he was on a Greek beach. The surprise had been nothing short of immense when he had called from Beijing via satellite phone. Back then, he had returned almost as a hero. The editor-in-chief had praised and commended him in front of the entire team. The other newspapers had copied or quoted from his articles. Just before he was due to go on his supposed holiday, Bergmann had told him that no one could be sent to
China, too dangerous. Once again, he and his boss had fallen out. Yet after Weigert's return, suddenly
all had been bliss again.

Weigert had thoroughly enjoyed it. For a few days, he had been a celebrated man. He had been the centre of attention, almost as if he himself had been involved in the events. For a brief moment, he had felt the pulse of world history, which had been beating faster than usual in Beijing during those days and weeks. It had been worth it.

But when he really thought about it, and he was doing just that now, he hadn't really become a first-class journalist. He was now 35 and still belonged to the second string. He was well aware of that. But it was his own fault; there was no doubt about that.

On the one hand, he was glad he had this job. He certainly preferred it to eking out an existence in the middle management of some company. Fortunately, he'd managed to escape that fate just in time, straight after finishing his studies.

Yet on the other hand, he found his current profession – and, when he thought about it properly, his life as a whole – increasingly boring. Nothing ever happened. The prospect of churning out stories until he retired, perhaps getting married and having children in the meantime, and spending the rest of his time consuming his decent salary, sometimes made him shudder.

He had often talked about it with his friend Villiger. And just as often, they had parted ways without having made any headway at all. Until Villiger finally gave it all up to live his life, as he put it. Yesterday he'd phoned him once more to say goodbye. By now, Villiger was probably already in Norway, on his way to his log cabin. The conversation hadn't lasted very long and had been rather tense.

They'd revived their old banter, only to agree at the end that they wanted to meet up again next spring over plenty of beer.

Weigert hadn't exactly felt at ease when he'd hung up the phone. His closest friend, perhaps the only one who really understood him, had moved away. But that wasn't all.

It dawned on Weigert that he had failed.

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Villiger had brought his dream to life, a step Weigert had so far lacked the courage to take. If only he knew where his dream had gone. He reached out for it, but his hands kept grasping at thin air.

He estimated there were still about eighty kilometres to Wewelsburg. In an hour he would be there to ask Pierre Martin a few more questions. It was the only lead he had. And this time he wouldn't let it go.

The rain was getting heavier and heavier, forming large puddles on the road. Weigert slowed down. It was almost 8 o'clock. As was his habit, he turned up the volume on the radio. Like any journalist, he had got into the habit of listening to or watching the news regularly. Although there was rarely anything of significance, he didn't want to miss it anyway.

It was like an addiction that the job brought with it, alongside increased nicotine and coffee consumption.

Weigert had cursed it often enough. Until this moment. A chime

sounded from the radio. Then the announcer's voice.

"It is now 8 pm. We bring you the world news. New York. In New York, about an hour ago, John Greenspan, a member of the UN Security Council, was shot dead in the street. The perpetrators, believed to be two men, managed to escape unidentified. The large-scale manhunt launched immediately has so far proved unsuccessful. There are no clues as to the motive. Eyewitnesses reported that the perpetrators tattooed a kind of mark on Greenspan's forehead before fleeing. We will interrupt our programme in the coming hour for a detailed report from our correspondent in New York. Brussels. The European Union's Foreign Minister..."

Weigert was alternately hot and cold. That was it! That was his rehabilitation! If it was the same mark as on the Eurofed President – and Weigert did not doubt this for a second

– then he had to be taken seriously again! Greenspan had been shot dead in broad daylight in front of witnesses. This time, no one would be able to cover anything up!

Suddenly his thoughts came to a halt. But what, then, did this damned castle he was heading for have to do with the matter? The Home Secretary had claimed to Volker that there was an authentic letter of confession from the Islamic People's Front. What made little sense in the case of the Eurofed President made perfect sense in Greenspan's. He had long been the target of attacks by Islamic fundamentalists, albeit only verbal ones so far.
After all, the UN Security Council has not exactly been kind to Muslims of late. For some years now, the representatives on the Council have no longer been appointed by the states to which they were previously beholden, but have been elected by the people in the various regions of the world. The Arabs were allowed to elect only one representative, whilst the USA, for example, provided four members. Thanks to the rapid rise in the status of the United Nations and the expansion of its remit since the 1990s, these men and women were among the most powerful in the world. And Greenspan, an American, had made himself the spokesperson against the rapid spread of Islam.

Weigert's sense of triumph waned somewhat. Now, people would believe him that he hadn't been hallucinating at Volker's. But the Wewelsburg lead seemed to be coming to nothing. There might be something to this Islamic People's Front after all. Provided, of course, that it involved the same perpetrators as in Volker's case and the same symbol.

For a moment, Weigert considered turning back. What was the point of going to Martin's and the castle now? Let him keep his SS stories from the day before yesterday to himself. But after all, he'd flown to Frankfurt specifically for this and had hired the car there. Since he'd come this far, he wanted at least to take the opportunity to
ask a few questions. The trip might well be in vain, but it hadn't been for nothing. After all, he'd paid for the ticket and the car out of his own pocket.

Weigert parked the car carefully. It was a hundred metres to Martin's house. It was now pouring with rain and he hadn't brought an umbrella. But there was nowhere else to park closer to the house; there simply wasn't any space.

Twenty minutes earlier, there had been a special broadcast on the radio. But it hadn't revealed anything new. Just a few statements from

politicians who, as usual after such events, expressed their shock, as well as a description of the crime scene and the course of events, as far as was known.

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On a busy street, two men had allegedly approached Greenspan and his bodyguard and opened fire immediately. It was reported that silencers had presumably been used this time as well. Mention was also made of the eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen the two perpetrators tattoo something onto Greenspan's body—more precisely, onto his forehead—in a matter of seconds. Tattooed, at least that was how they had put it.

Weigert would cut short his holiday and go to the newsroom tomorrow to look through all the news agency reports on the assassination. Then he would ring the 'Blatt's' New York correspondent. She was surely already on the story. Of that
He had expected more. After all, he was going to give Bergmann, that ignoramus, a piece of his mind. And then there was the Austrian authorities' cover-up, which needed to be exposed and challenged. A lot of work lay ahead of him.

But first and foremost, it was about Martin and Wewelsburg Castle, although Weigert's interest in the matter had waned considerably in the last hour.

Weigert slammed the car door shut and ran through the rain to the entrance of Martin's house. He found shelter from the wet under the small canopy. He pressed his finger against the doorbell.

Seconds passed, but no one opened the door. Weigert rang the bell a second time. As he hadn't announced his visit, he assumed Martin wasn't at home. In that case, he intended to take a room in the small guesthouse he'd discovered right next to the castle during his last visit. He was sure he'd have better luck tomorrow.

Weigert's eyes wandered over the front of the house. He saw that a light was on in one room. As far as he could remember, it must be the kitchen. So there it was. He rang a third time. Still nothing. Perhaps Martin and his wife were sitting in front of the television. As the two of them were already quite a bit older, they might not have heard him.

Weigert decided to go round the house and try the back door, through which Martin and he had set off on their walk to the castle during his first visit.

He hurried through the dark garden. The dim light from the streetlamps didn't reach this far. The wind whipped the raindrops against his face, leaving wet streaks behind. Weigert thought of the wonderful strong coffee he'd enjoyed here just a few days ago. The thought made the weather and the cold seem more bearable.

Now he had reached the back door. He raised his hand to knock. Even before his knuckles struck the wood for the first time, the door was suddenly flung open.

"What...!?"

That was all he could manage. It all happened so damn fast. A figure tried to storm out of the door, but it collided with Weigert at full force. He was thrown backwards, stumbled and fell. A second figure came out of the door. The other man had staggered, but he was still standing. The face!

Weigert recognised him. It was the man Martin had been talking to whilst Weigert was looking at the Walhalla.

Instinctively, Weigert rolled to one side to avoid an attack. But as he tried to scramble to his feet from the roll, a kick struck him in the back with full force and knocked him down again. Weigert had once possessed considerable resilience. For a time, he and Villiger had subjected themselves to the harsh discipline of a karate dojo three times a week. But that had been several years ago.
Weigert cried out.

As he looked up from the ground, dazed, he saw two figures ten metres ahead of him nimbly scaling the garden fence and disappearing into the darkness. Come on, get up! But the command issued by Weigert's brain was met by his body with intense pain in the kidney area. Slowly, agonisingly slowly, Weigert got to his feet. He gasped for air. All he could still hear were the fading footsteps, rapidly receding and merging with the sound of the rain. He staggered towards the garden fence, but as he tried to climb over, he felt a stabbing pain in his side. He decided against it.

Only now did the shock of the sudden raid hit him. Fear slowly crept up from his stomach into Weigert's consciousness. His legs began to tremble. He wanted to sit down, but his gaze fell on the open back door. Martin! Was the Frenchman in there? Or had the burglars deliberately chosen his absence for their heist?

He dragged himself through the door, closed it behind him and bolted it. A brief pause to catch his breath, then groping for the light switch. There it was. As the room brightened, the first thing Weigert saw was indescribable chaos. In the hallway, someone had knocked over a chest of drawers. The drawers had been ripped out, their contents scattered wildly across the floor. A shelf next to it was still in place, but the two vases that had been sitting on it now lay shattered in front of it. Where was Martin?

A sharp pain in his kidneys made Weigert wince. He pressed his hand to his side and stifled a groan. There! Into the living room!

As Weigert tried to drag himself through the door, he recoiled in horror. Martin's wife was hanging from a thin rope that had been looped over one of the wooden ceiling beams. There was about half a metre of space between her feet and the floor. Her face had turned blue, and her eyeballs had bulged from their sockets.

Weigert stared at the body as if paralysed. Those bastards! But what was that? Something was protruding from the pockets of her dressing gown on both sides. It looked like bricks. Her feet had been tied together in a strange way, so that they formed a right angle. Her hands, on the other hand, had been left unbound.

Martin himself lay motionless in the middle of the room. His shirt hung in tatters from his body, leaving his chest exposed. They had done him a terrible harm. His face was now nothing more than an indefinable mass of flesh and blood. Long cuts, from which blood was still oozing, ran across his chest.

Shit, no! Weigert was on the verge of panicking. With an immense effort of will, he forced himself to stay calm. He dragged himself over to the woman who had hanged herself. His hand fumbled in his trouser pocket for the pocket knife he always carried with him. He pulled it out. With trembling fingers, he opened the blade and cut through the rope. He caught the body and let it slide to the ground. Fingers to the neck. No pulse. She was dead.

Then the Frenchman. As Weigert bent down towards him, he saw that Martin's eyes had opened—or rather, what was left of them.

"What… What's happened?"

Weigert stammered, no longer in control of himself. He tried to lay the man's head gently on a pillow.

Speaking was clearly a struggle for Martin. He kept spitting up blood.

"They… they… found… nothing…"

Weigert had to press his ear right up against Martin's mouth to understand him.

"What didn't they find?" "Take

it..."

Weigert's heart was racing; his mind was unable to form a coherent thought.

"What? What should I take?" "Over...

over there..."

Martin made a faint gesture towards the corner of the room. All Weigert could make out there was a considerable collection of green plants in large pots.

"In that... tree there... Take it.....Please!"

"Calm down. First of all, I'll call an ambulance. Do you have any first-aid supplies in the house!?"

Weigert's voice was on the verge of breaking with panic.

“No… no!” Martin’s eyes looked pleadingly at him. He had to cough again. Blood was oozing from his mouth.

"Take... something to write with... please!"

Weigert’s hands fumbled in the pockets of his coat. He pulled out his notepad and produced his pen. The trembling in his hands had grown worse. Hopefully he would be able to write.
Martin wanted to tell him something important; he realised that now. “Karl

Steiner… he’s… in… Tibet… Ask… for Steiner…”

Martin paused. Then he continued, his voice growing increasingly faint.

“At the monastery... of Tashi Lhunpo...”

53

The Frenchman laboriously spelled out the name. The pauses he had to take grew longer and longer. Weigert had never before witnessed a person’s death throes so directly. Yet he sensed that Martin’s end was near.

“Go... go to Steiner...” The Frenchman looked at him and tried to manage something like a smile.

“Good... luck...”

Martin tried to speak again, but he could no longer manage it. His eyes froze.

Weigert lowered his notepad. As if in a trance, he looked around the room. His eyes were searching for the telephone. Then his gaze fell once more on the potted plants in the corner.

Weigert jumped to his feet. With frantic movements, he examined the small tree Martin had pointed to. Nothing. Just a perfectly ordinary tree in a perfectly ordinary pot, thought Weigert. He knew there was no point in calling a doctor. Martin and his wife were dead. There, the telephone!

As Weigert went to put the pot with the plant back on its stand, he was already turning towards the telephone. He was so flustered that he didn't place the tree properly. It fell from the stand onto the hard parquet floor. The pot shattered, the soil trickled out.

Weigert's head snapped round, startled by the shattering sound of the pot.

Then he saw what Martin had been trying to draw his attention to: something silvery was glinting out from between the tree's roots. Weigert dug through the soil, and the object turned out to be two CDs – computer storage media that had long since replaced the good old hard drives.

So that was it! But what was on them? It must be pretty important if it was worth killing two people for. He knew he had to call the police and an ambulance now. If the officers found the CDs, he might never find out what was on them.

Did it have anything to do with Wewelsburg Castle? Or was it even relevant to his story?

He decided to keep the two silver discs and not tell the police anything about them.

He couldn’t help Martin and his wife anyway. If there was anything on the data discs that was of no significance to him but might help solve the murders, he could still send it anonymously to the investigating officers. But if it was indeed significant, then he was well ahead of his colleagues. Despite the horrific sight that had deeply unsettled him, he was still able to think that far ahead.
Sometimes journalism literally went over dead bodies.

Nevertheless, no one would come back to life if he handed the data storage devices over to the police.

Weigert could feel the pain again. He reached for the phone and dialled the police emergency number.

His whole body was shaking.

54

Vienna, 27 November

"Who do you think you are!"

Bergmann had been shouting all along, but now his voice cracked.

“You’re investigating a story without an assignment, and you’ve already made a right mess of it!”

The editor-in-chief jumped up and his small frame darted out from behind the desk. He stood towering over Weigert to emphasise the impact of his vociferous attack.

“I’ve already made it clear to you that, after your recent blunders, extra caution is required! And what do you do!? You simply head off to that strange castle again on your holiday… of course! And on top of that, you get caught up in a double murder!”

Weigert’s face was just a few centimetres from his boss’s. This time, Weigert had sworn to himself, he wouldn’t let it slide as easily as he had last time. He took advantage of the pause Bergmann made to catch his breath.

“You know as well as I do that yesterday, whilst I was on my way to this strange castle, as you are wont to put it, John Greenspan was murdered! And you also know that the same mark was branded onto his forehead as on Volker’s. And. ....."

Weigert couldn’t get any further. Bergmann had taken a few deep breaths and began shouting again. As he did so, he put his hands on his hips. His whole body was vibrating.

"To hell with it, Weigert! As far as Volker is concerned, you’re the only one claiming that. Even if it’s true – which I certainly don’t believe – we simply have to accept that there are a few madmen out there who copy such things! What does Greenspan have to do with Volker? The two didn’t know each other, nor did they belong to the same political camps. Their roles were also completely different.
You’re seeing ghosts!”

Weigert, who would have loved to shout out in protest, faltered. He realised that he could offer his editor-in-chief no plausible explanation for a connection between the two murders, apart from this very sign.
And for that, at least in Volker’s case, he still had no proof. He could only hope that the Austrian authorities would now, in light of the Greenspan attack, admit something after all. But there had to be a connection. Weigert was firmly convinced of it.

"You're not here for fun! Even if you don't like it, you have to do what's best for the 'Blatt'."

Bergmann was now pacing up and down. He had lowered his voice slightly.

"Weigert, you’re involved in a murder case. Two people have been brutally murdered. And you, an editor of this
newspaper, are right in the thick of it! You’ve already dragged our reputation through the mud enough with your reports on the Volker murder! That’s enough now!”

Weigert sensed that Bergmann had long since made up his mind.
The “meeting” to which he had summoned Weigert was probably just a way for him to let off steam. Should he now play his last trump card? Should he tell the editor-in-chief about his discovery at Martin’s?

He hadn’t told the police officers who had questioned Weigert any of this.
This morning – having hardly slept at all – he had

inserted both CDs into his computer. The result was not exactly encouraging. Although he had been able to establish that there was a file on each of the two discs, he had been unable to read them. None of his programmes were capable of processing these files. The stuff had resisted all attempts. And so he had no idea what the contents of the CDs were, nor whether he would manage to make them readable at all.

Of course, he and Bergmann could call in some specialist, but who knew whether the two discs really contained anything of significance? Weigert couldn't take the risk; he'd fallen out with Bergmann far too badly for that.

It struck Weigert like a bolt of lightning that there was another reason for this: if he told his boss about the existence of the two CDs, he would be admitting to having misappropriated evidence in a murder case. Bergmann would drop him like a hot potato.

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The editor-in-chief eyed his subordinate suspiciously. What on earth was Weigert thinking?

Bergmann's agitation was genuine; after all, it was his – yes, his – newspaper at stake. Yet he also knew that much more was at stake than that. Schneider had phoned him a few hours earlier. He had been the first to tell him about the murder of Martin and his wife. His editor, he had

, was involved in it. His editor: that implied that Bergmann was involved in it too. And it meant that the banker, who commanded so much respect from the editor-in-chief of the ‘Blatt’, was dissatisfied with him.

Bergmann was not a man of conflict, at least not when that conflict had to be played out with peers or even superiors. He wanted to be recognised, and so he relied instead on friendly helpfulness.

It must have been important if Schneider asked him for something. And there must have
be something at stake that was in their mutual interest. Yet the fact that he, Dr Karl Bergmann, the editor-in-chief of the “Blatt”, had not been let in on the exact reason for the interest in Weigert made him angry.

In any case, Schneider had not answered his questions.

And so Bergmann had picked up the phone to call the relevant
police authority in Germany. They had, in any case, just put together an initial report for the media –

The officer had read the contents of the report aloud to him. When he came to the part describing the condition in which the bodies had been found, Bergmann was one step ahead.

Two bricks in their pockets, feet at right angles. Bergmann knew how to interpret certain signs. That was why he also knew that his editor had nothing to do with the murders.

That arsehole, thought Weigert. If he wants good stories in his paper, he can’t just abandon his editors like that when they’re in trouble! But actually, he shouldn’t have
else to be expected. Weigert had already witnessed such behaviour
from Bergmann twice before with other colleagues. He was simply too weak to actually see through conflicts that might take their toll on him.

Weigert was furious, but, worse still, he was afraid. Not just because of the consequences Bergmann might impose. But above all because of the two dead bodies he'd seen yesterday in Wewelsburg.
Of course, the police would question him again. But he hadn't done anything. Yet perhaps they would do something to him. Ever since he'd seen Pierre Martin's blood-soaked body and his wife dangling lifelessly from the ceiling, he'd been aware of that possibility.

His reason told him that this was highly unlikely. But his fear remained.

Weigert was startled out of his thoughts.

"We must save what can still be saved!"

Bergmann was being dramatic again.

"I must prevent the newspaper from getting even more deeply involved in this whole affair. There is no other option but to suspend you from duty."

Weigert stared at Bergmann. Suspend: every single letter of the word gnawed its way through his thoughts. So it was about his job.

Bergmann returned Weigert's gaze. Now it was out in the open. In a few minutes he would ring Schneider to tell him that he had fulfilled his wish.

Weigert felt empty and burnt out. Once again, he hadn't defended himself properly, hadn't fought back as he'd intended. He'd also been dealt a damn poor hand. His editor-in-chief clearly held the better cards. Weigert turned around without a word and slammed the office door shut behind him. Bergmann reached for the phone.

In the corridor, Weigert ran into his department head. "So,

Mr Weigert, what happened with the boss?"

Werner Hillgruber looked concerned. He tried to look after everything that concerned the people in his department. Besides, he liked Weigert.

“He’s suspended me from duty.”

“What!? That can’t be true!”

Hillgruber rarely raised his voice. When he did, it meant something. He glanced at his watch, then at Weigert.

“Come on, let’s go and get something to eat.”

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Weigert idly poked at his chips with his fork; they lay on the plate next to the Wiener schnitzel. He hadn’t even touched the beer glass in front of him.

He had told Hillgruber the details of what had happened yesterday. As he did so, it felt as though it were all just a bad dream. Eventually he would wake up and it would be over.

“Cheer up! We’ll sort this out.”

Hillgruber radiated an optimism that Weigert couldn’t share. “We need to

proceed systematically.”

The head of department took a sip of his apple juice.

“So: we have the murder of Bernhard Volker, the head of Eurofed. We have a second murder, that of John Greenspan, a member of the UN Security Council. Are you even listening to me?”

Weigert looked up from his plate. “Yes,

yes.”

"Listen, Mr Weigert. I believe what you saw at Volker’s. You’re not the sort of person who tends to make things like that up or pass off unconfirmed rumours as your own observations. You’ve been working in my department for far too long for that. So we have one thing in common between the two attacks: the mark that was made on both their foreheads, however it was done. Interrupt me if I
leave anything

out.” “Right.”

“In Volker’s case, we can’t prove it, as the authorities appear to be keeping this detail under wraps. There may well be perfectly normal reasons for this, such as the fact that they are following a lead and don’t want to cause too much of a stir here. You, Mr Weigert, discovered this symbol—which has not yet been used by any extremist group or terrorist organisation—in a book and sought out its author. But he couldn’t tell you much more than that this very symbol is embedded in the floor of a hall in a castle that was supposed to become an ideological centre for the SS decades ago. Is that correct?”

"Yes."

“Did he really tell you nothing else that might help us?”

Weigert thought for a moment.

“No, nothing. Just history.”

“Very well. The problem is that we have a letter of confession from the Islamic People’s Front regarding the Volker murder, which is supposedly authentic. But this doesn’t fit with your castle.”

"But why, then, were Martin and his wife killed?"

"A good question. That’s precisely what makes me suspect that there might be something to this lead after all. After all..."

"Wait! There’s something else. I did tell you about the man who knocked me down. I’ve seen that man before. On my first visit to Martin’s, in fact.

The Frenchman spoke briefly with him whilst I wasn’t there. When I joined them, the two of them said goodbye. Martin told me he was just a tourist who wanted to visit the castle.”

“Did you mention that to the police as well?”

“Yes, of course.”

"Were you able to describe the man?"

"More or less. The first time, I didn’t pay much attention to him. The second time, it was dark and he attacked straight away. After that, I had other things on my mind."

"There really does seem to be something to this Martin business. After all, they only found him dead, didn’t they?"

Now the moment had come when he had to make a decision. He hadn’t told anyone yet what the Frenchman had managed to tell him, not even the police. He had also kept the discovery of the two data storage devices to himself. Should he now let Hillgruber in on the secret? But Hillgruber was just an employee of the *Blatt*. Even though he didn’t like Bergmann, his position meant he was obliged to tell him the truth if he asked. If he were to bring Hillgruber into it now

, telling him more than he had even told the police, then... No, he had to get on with it alone.

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“Yes, Martin and his wife were already dead. It was just his wife who was strange.”

“Why?”

“She’d been hanged.”

“You’ve already told me that.”

"Well, yes, but that seems rather elaborate to me. They could simply have shot her."

"And then there were a few odd things as well." "What sort

of things?"

Hillgruber pushed his empty plate aside. The waiter cleared the table and brought the dessert.

“Two bricks were sticking out of the pockets of her dress. I can hardly believe the old woman was just carrying them about like that. And her feet had been tied together in a very peculiar way, so that they formed a right angle.”

Hillgruber looked somewhat perplexed.

“But you didn’t find anything comparable to the symbols at Volker’s or Greenspan’s?”

“No, nothing.”

"Anyway. We’ll just have to wait and see how the Greenspan case develops. If a claim of responsibility from the Islamic People’s Front turns up there too, then there’s probably some truth in it. The only question is, what’s the connection to this Frenchman? Perhaps he had some dealings with Arabs. Well, anyway..."

Weigert stirred his vanilla pudding. The red raspberry sauce spread across the top reminded him of Pierre Martin’s battered body. Disgusted, he pushed the bowl away.

“Don’t let it give you grey hairs just yet, Mr Weigert. You’re not the first person this newspaper has suspended from duty. Once Bergmann has calmed down, I’ll find a way to set things right again.”

There was almost something motherly about Hillgruber when it came to standing up for ‘his’ people.

He never said much about it. Yet almost everyone in the department had experienced how problems would suddenly be resolved.

Once, Hillgruber had asked Weigert if he was happy with his salary. What was he supposed to say? He’d only just started working for the “Blatt” at the time, and starting salaries were, after all, low. So no. Hillgruber hadn’t brought up the subject again. When Weigert held his next payslip in his hand, he saw that his department head had convinced the editor-in-chief that one of his staff was underpaid. The pay rise had been quite substantial. You could rely on Hillgruber; Weigert knew that from numerous other incidents as well.

And Hillgruber didn’t particularly care for Bergmann. He simply considered him incompetent.

“Bergmann has misjudged the situation once again. But we’ve all seen that happen plenty of times before.

Volker and Greenspan, both outstanding figures in international politics. Both men who aren’t just murdered like that, without a second thought. It takes a powerful organisation to do that. I’d bet a month’s salary that there’s a parallel here.”

Murder or no murder, parallels or not. Weigert had been suspended from duty. That was his main problem at the moment.

“So, what am I supposed to do now?”

Weigert looked at Hillgruber, almost as if seeking help.

“Nothing at all for the time being. Go home and enjoy a few days off, even if they’ve come about under unfortunate circumstances. If you want to go away, make sure you leave me a number where I can reach you.”

“All right. But... Do you think Bergmann wants to fire me?”

“He might try. But there are a few others who’ll have a say in the matter.”

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In his mind, Hillgruber was already devising an alliance he intended to forge. There was the deputy editor-in-chief, with whom Hillgruber got on brilliantly, the culture editor, and, last but not least, Bergmann's secretary. His interest in her was probably the only thing that connected him and Bergmann. The aim was to deal Bergmann a defeat.
Of course, he would also look after 'his' editor, as fostering loyalty could prove useful later on.

After all, Hillgruber didn't want to remain head of department forever. He fancied Bergmann's leather swivel chair.

But if Hillgruber hadn't been convinced that Weigert was right, he wouldn't have even thought of it.

"Let's wait and see whether a letter of claim from the Islamic People's Front regarding the Greenspan assassination turns up in the next few days. If so, Bergmann will have to admit that you were on the right track.
And as for the murders in Wewelsburg, don't worry about them. After all, it wasn't you, was it?"

Hillgruber smiled. Weigert shook his head slowly. His thoughts were racing in all directions. He thought of the Islamic People's Front. Wasn't Hillgruber also on the wrong track this time? At any rate, he had been kind enough to pick up the bill for the meal.

Once the two had said their goodbyes, Weigert walked to his car. Even from a distance, he could see the note tucked under the windscreen wiper. To make matters worse, it was a parking ticket. Some days, it seemed, nothing was spared you. When he reached his car, he reached for it.

It wasn't a fine. It looked much more like a leaflet. Weigert began to read. It was a poem, printed on computer paper, with no indication of who had written it. As he skimmed through the lines, the vaulted cellar in Wewelsburg Castle came to mind.

The feeling of smallness and insignificance he had felt back then came over him once more. Irritated, he read on.

“Awaken, ‘the end of this creation’; the last days of ‘finality’ draw near,

from the depths of repression,

flow through hidden crevices and through cracks, the

pains of despair

with the bitter taste of the certainty of

being but a part of it,

that, in the maelstrom of

omnipotence, reveals its

transience.

Thus the ‘end of this creation’ awakens;

the final phase of ‘destiny’ draws near.

Surrounded by the stench, the tears of

mediocrity and insignificance wither away.

"Reason and feeling experience the blind grief that

is wildly suffocated in the fury of the drawing.

Gentle as the sun, it awakens in the

morning, surrounded by radiant

splendour,

the beguiling beauty of all eternity, the triumphant

smile of victory."

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> San Francisco, 27 November

"I get the impression you don't have a handle on things over there, Joe."

Thomas Beckett was agitated, and this time he made no attempt to hide his anger. Kipling's sweaty face filled almost the entire screen of the videophone.

"What do you mean, 'I'? They were people from UN Intelligence. No one could have anticipated that they would behave so amateurishly and allow themselves to be caught off guard. But unfortunately, that's not all..."

Kipling dabbed the sweat from his face with his handkerchief. He dreaded it, but he had to tell Beckett.

"They weren't caught off guard by just anyone. As we later found out, it was that journalist from Vienna. But don't worry, Thomas. I've already set everything in motion. We'll take Weigert out of the picture."

Beckett's right-hand man fidgeted nervously with a ballpoint pen – clicking it on and off, over and over.

"What do you mean? We can't just take him out of circulation, as you say. I hope you realise that doing so will only draw even more attention to what we'd rather not have in the public eye. Where there's a bloodhound, others will follow. And every newcomer will stick their nose deeper in than the one before them. Even if the
most essential details remain hidden, overzealous journalists could still cause a great deal of damage. I hope you realise that, Joe."

Kipling was quick to reply.

“Of course. But don’t worry. Things aren’t looking good for Weigert anyway. We’ve made use of that. A few hours ago, his newspaper suspended him from duty. We didn’t even have to do much to help that along. His boss wasn’t on good terms with him anyway because of the Volker affair. The fact that it was he who found Martin and his wife dead will be the end of him. We’ll pin the murders on him.”

Kipling was pleased with his move. He had made a virtue of necessity. And as a lawyer, he knew it shouldn’t be too difficult to gather the necessary evidence to incriminate Weigert. His assistants were already raring to go.
Beckett could be satisfied that he, Kipling, was on the spot. His connections in Vienna were paying off once again.

Beckett pondered. Kipling’s idea was sound; there was no doubt about that. If Weigert were to lose his job and face trial on suspicion of murder, he would have other things to do than continue snooping around. That solved one problem, albeit the
smallest of them all.

“All right, Joe. Set everything in motion. And make sure you don’t make another mistake this time.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll sort that scribbler out. But what’s the latest on the Greenspan case?”

"Virtually nothing. You’ve realised, of course, that we couldn’t cover anything up this time. They shot him in broad daylight. That’s precisely why it’s so important that this journalist can’t cause any more trouble. We’ll probably have to pin the assassination on the Islamic People’s Front again. In Greenspan’s case, that’s
entirely plausible. Of course, thanks to this Weigert, people will now be looking for parallels between the Greenspan assassination and the Volker murder. We’ll have no choice but to turn up the media volume and stir things up a bit against the Islamic fundamentalists.”

Beckett knew how to launch such a campaign. He had plenty of experience with it. Many people would condemn the assassination attempt, or had already done so. Some would seize the opportunity to jump on the bandwagon: Christian politicians would warn against the further spread of Islam, while law-and-order advocates would warn of the growing threat of terrorism. Many would join the chorus simply because they themselves feared they might one day become a target.

Advocates for the Third World would draw attention to the social situation in Arab countries.

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And each of these statements would in turn provoke counter-statements. This would also lead to a few embarrassing moments, which would in turn spark disputes, as some would seize the opportunity to get one over on their political opponents.

The media would dutifully print and broadcast whatever hot air was being spouted. For them, the status of the
information disseminator would, in any case, usually count for more than the information itself.

They wouldn't even need to do much to help things along. And eventually, the fog would be so thick that no one would even think of looking elsewhere for the key to the solution.

"So, Joe, are you really sure that Martin had no closer connection to our friends?"

Becken asked this for the second time, emphasising the word "friends" with a disparaging tone. He wanted to make sure that Kipling wasn't keeping any further problems from him.

"Yes, I'm certain. As I said, the interview conducted by the UN people only revealed that Martin had managed to track down this Steiner. A remarkable achievement for an amateur historian, mind you. But all he wanted to know from him was information about Wewelsburg. Believe me, Thomas: he wasn't one of them. If he had been, he would have told us. With certain interrogation methods, people don't lie. According to Martin, Steiner died six months ago; the Frenchman is now dead as well. Even though Weigert barged in, he only found his body. The UN people didn't have the chance to arrange him as skilfully as his wife did, but
in any case, he was dead when Weigert found him. We've got this under control, really."

Even though Beckett didn't like Kipling, he knew he could rely on him. And right now, he needed him.

"But Martin didn't reveal where Steiner had been staying until his death?"

"The UN lot didn't get much more out of him than Tibet. Then he died."

"Are you sure your helpers can be relied upon? I mean, isn't the result a bit thin?"

"The people from UN intelligence are professionals, Thomas, not amateurs."

"When I look at the results and the fact that they let themselves be caught off guard, I doubt it."

"But..."

Beckett interrupted Kipling.

“All right, Joe. There’s nothing we can do about it now. Make sure you sort things out with the journalist. As soon as you’ve done that, get in touch. We might have another job for you in Europe.”

“You mean the sleeper agents?”

"Perhaps. But that hasn’t been decided yet. In any case, take care of yourself. You know, after Greenspan, you could be the next one to get caught up in it."

"You too, Thomas."

61

Vienna, 28 November

The ice cubes in the glass crackled and clinked as Weigert poured the ‘Cardhu’ over them. Malt in its finest form, unblended and a full dozen years old. The water of life from the mist-shrouded
Scottish Highlands. The light from the reading lamp was refracted by the light brown of the whisky, the milky white of the ice cubes—which lent the liquid the final maturity of its twelve-year history—and the cut of the crystal glass.

Weigert gave the glass a gentle shake so that the ice cubes clinked against the rim, and took a deep sip. A pleasant warmth flooded his body, whilst his fingers holding the glass remained cool. Fire and ice. Two forces whose elemental opposites formed a perfect coalition within the crystal glass, uniting to give birth to something new.

As if to complete the harmony, the sounds of Scottish bagpipes filled the room with their vibrations, bringing their message from

long-gone times into the present.

In front of him, on his desk, Weigert had laid out everything to do with his story.

And there was no longer any doubt that it was now truly his story.

In the top left corner lay Pierre Martin's book – open – revealing the page on which the symbol was depicted, the one that had been indelibly seared into Weigert's mind, just as it had been branded onto the victims' foreheads. There, half-concealing the floor of the Wewelsburg
hall, lay the two silvery, shimmering discs. Despite repeated attempts, he had failed to wrest from them the contents they held. They had resisted every attempt and preferred to keep their secret.

To the right lay three piles of newspaper clippings and printed press releases. One pile was for Bernhard Volker, the murdered President of the European Central Bank; a second was for John Greenspan, a member of the UN Security Council who had met the same fate as Volker. The third contained material on the Islamic People's Front. Weigert
knew the contents of the three piles almost by heart.

In front of him, neatly laid out side by side, were two pieces of paper. On one was the poem he had found by his car; on the other, the brief notes about what Martin had told him before he died.

So that was all he had. Weigert leaned back and lit a cigarette. The smoke rose and mingled with the sounds of the bagpipes.

It had now been ten days since he had been the only journalist to see Volker's body. And it was in that very capacity – as a journalist – that he had written about it. Yet something had changed in those ten days. Weigert had gone from being the observer to the observed, from an outsider to someone directly involved.

The first two murders of Volker and Greenspan left Weigert cold. Assassination attempts on politicians happened time and again. That was simply the
occupational hazard of that profession. The media reported on it, no more and no less.

But to find two elderly people, one hanging dead from the ceiling, the other lying horribly mutilated in his final moments, that was
something else entirely. It cut deeper, not just because it might cost him his job.

A drag on the cigarette, another sip of whisky. Losing the job... Was it really that bad? What had he done so far? He'd
written about events that others had initiated.

Blowing up idiotic political statements because they looked good in the headlines.

Rewritten agency reports that had been typed into computers by other journalists thousands of kilometres away. And now and then a commentary, just not too far off the editorial line, otherwise they would have rewritten it. No, he'd never sold himself out, not that, but he hadn't really fought for anything either. What for? In a society whose only universally recognised value was prosperity for all, there was nothing worth fighting for.

Many of his acquaintances envied him for his job.

After all, he was always there when something was happening. He spoke to ministers,
He travelled with presidents, and would occasionally hear the gunfire of revolutions. Yes, he was there, but that was all. He did not take action himself. It was an illusion to believe such a thing. He merely put the actions of others down on paper.

And of those, in turn, mostly only what people wanted to see put down on paper.

Rarely had Weigert found the time and peace of mind to analyse his situation in this way. Time and again, one event had followed another,
story following the next. Nothing was as old as yesterday's newspaper. Only very, very rarely had he asked himself what sense it made to
such a barrage of information upon people. What could they, indeed what did they want to do with it?

The era of great political movements was over. Where people had once taken to the streets for their ideas, today a small caste of colourless bureaucrats managed gross national products. The
The masses stuffed themselves silly. And the media provided the theatrical backdrop for pseudo-events – bread and circuses. They suggested movement where there was none. They highlighted points of contention that were not really such. They took seriously matters that, at best, one could only shake one's head at.

For the few citizens who were genuinely interested, this at least maintained the impression that politics still existed, that the final exit from history had not yet been completed. Thus they clung to the belief that they could help shape events with their vote, even though they had long since cast it in the double sense of the word.

Weigert had no illusions that he was part of this system. A cog in a gigantic machine. He did not yet despise himself for it, but he had long since begun to criticise his role.

“To make a difference” – that was what he wanted when he started at the “Blatt”, young and full of drive.

A few months later, it had become clear to him that a newspaper could not bring about change, and certainly not a single journalist. Cosmetic changes were the best he could hope for. The alliance of democracy and prosperity swallowed up social contradictions and conflicts like a black hole. Everything was debated to death until nothing remained of it.

Sometimes – not least thanks to the media – the faces at the top changed, but it was as if an animal had been snatched from an anthill. There was a brief flurry of commotion and unrest, but then another
another animal took its place. The anthill remained intact. Business as usual.

Did he really have that much to lose? When he really thought about it, probably not. But what would come after a possible dismissal? Was there an alternative to his current job?

He could accept that his work at the “Blatt” had come to an end. But he had to pay his rent, he had to eat, and he was by no means averse to life’s other comforts. Whether he was typing his articles into a computer for the “Blatt” or
another paper, whether he joined any old company or lugged sacks around somewhere, it made no difference. The system remained in place, keeping him in a state of dependency. At most, it offered different shades of captivity.

Perhaps Villiger had done the only right thing. But he’d only been able to do it because he’d played along beforehand. Because without money, there was no way out. Villiger... That was the solution! Damn it, why hadn’t he thought of it straight away? He could manage to coax the secret out of the silvery discs.

His friend had a few hobbies that were not without a certain eccentricity. For a while, he had practised the art of sword fighting and had become a specialist in medieval weapons. Then

he had delved into chaos theory, just like that. Weigert had never understood a thing about it, despite Villiger's numerous attempts to initiate him into the secrets of disorder.

After studying chaos theory, he had eventually turned his attention to coding systems. He had simply been fascinated by the possibility of forming meaningful words from seemingly random combinations of letters and numbers. He had always called it "semantic transformations" and had taken great delight whenever he had sent Weigert yet another coded "beer voucher"

. Weigert had puzzled over them from time to time, but he had only ever managed to crack one of Villiger's encrypted texts.

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He had revelled in that triumph until Villiger revealed to him that it had been one of the most primitive forms of encryption, the sort taught to every underage scout. Sometimes Weigert had thought Villiger was mad. But he was too intelligent for that. He was probably just a bit eccentric in some ways, even if you could hardly tell.

Weigert had to persuade Villiger to take on the two CDs. Firstly, he was a computer specialist, and secondly, he had his code –

Fimmel. That was his chance. But Villiger was in Norway. Weigert glanced at his watch: half past midnight. He decided to postpone his call.

The data storage devices were the most obvious lead he had. That was what he had to pursue first. Perhaps their contents could free him from the predicament he was in. Only then would he decide what to do with his second lead: Karl Steiner and Tashi Lhunpo.

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Vienna, 29 November

They had chained him up. The steel links wrapped around his joints, cutting deep into the flesh, which was already bleeding in places.
To his left and right, torches burned, bathing the large dome-shaped room in flickering light. From somewhere came the sound of drums, at first faint, then growing louder and louder – muffled and rhythmic – until it swelled to a crescendo.

A figure dressed entirely in black stood before him, his face concealed by a cloth that left only two slits for his eyes.
Triumphantly, the figure thrust its hand aloft, holding a long, sceptre-like object. He cried out, trying to break free, but the more he tugged at his chains, the deeper they cut into his flesh. Other black figures, who had formed a semicircle around him, also raised their arms into the air, stretching them out to form a V.

The man in front of him grasped the object with both hands and pointed it at the captive's face. The thick end of the metal rod was red-hot and drawing ever closer. The heat was already palpable. Screaming,

struggling – it was no use. He had no chance left. In a few seconds, they would brand the black sun onto him.

Weigert awoke drenched in sweat. Trembling, he sat up. At first disorientation, then the realisation of the familiar. His bed, the overflowing ashtray beside it, his clothes strewn wildly across the room. Nothing, just a dream. He let himself sink back down, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. But there was something else. The telephone!

Weigert struggled out of bed and walked, naked as he was, into his study. His papers were still spread out on the desk, just as he'd left them yesterday. The level in the whisky bottle had dropped considerably, he noted as he reached for the receiver. He felt it too.

He answered.

"Weigert."

He felt a stale taste in his mouth, as he always did when he'd smoked and drunk too much.

"Yes, Hans... It's Walter."

The police, your friends and helpers, thought Weigert, glancing at the clock hanging on the opposite wall: 10.17, time to get going.
Müller sounded agitated. Weigert suppressed a yawn and fished for the packet of cigarettes lying on the desk.

"The UN secret service has just questioned me again."

Müller spoke quickly, his words almost tumbling over one another. Weigert's brain slowly kicked into gear. Things were starting to get interesting.

"It looked like business as usual."

Why on earth did he have to wake him up, then? Or had he woken up because of the dream anyway?

“Are you still there?”

Weigert fumbled a cigarette out of the packet and put it in his mouth.

“Yeah, yeah. Carry on.”

“There was just one man in the office where I was supposed to report. While we were talking, there was a knock at the door and he had to step out of the room for a moment.”

Weigert had heard more exciting things. The lighter – where was the lighter?

“Curious as I am, I took the opportunity to have a quick look around the desk. I wanted to know why these blokes had summoned me again, even though I’m a policeman.”

The lighter was nowhere to be seen. It was probably in the bedroom. The day was off to a good start.

"And on the desk, there was something that will interest you: an arrest warrant for double murder – against you."

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Weigert opened his mouth; the cigarette fell out. It was a good thing he hadn’t lit it yet.

“What!?”

"Yes, for God's sake. Signed by François Benoist, the head of Eurocops. Reason: two murders committed three days ago in Germany."

"Shit, but it wasn't me!"

"That's exactly what I think. You'd be capable of a lot, but hardly that. I've no idea what you've stumbled upon, but the UN lot are dead keen on you. They'll come for you, today."

Weigert was suddenly wide awake. Müller's voice sounded frightened.

"You haven't heard anything from me, anyway. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

"Right, I've got to go now, someone's coming into my room. Take care and… good luck!"

Weigert said "Thanks", but Müller had already hung up. His thoughts were racing. Of course he was involved in the business with Martin. But they couldn't pin two murders on him just because of that! But given that they'd already covered up evidence in the Volker assassination…

What to do? Call a solicitor? But who? Weigert had never needed one before. Call the editor-in-chief? What for? That arsehole would finish him off now anyway. You couldn't blame him. Who needs an editor who's in custody on suspicion of murder? Weigert's knees were shaking. He sank into his leather armchair.

Something must be seriously rotten at the UN Secret Service and Eurocops. Someone was playing a game there, and he was the victim. If they caught him now, they'd find Martin's two CDs as well.
Bloody hell! There was hardly any better incriminating evidence. That stuff had to go, and so did he. But what then? Never mind, it was his only chance

to shed light on the darkness that was threatening to swallow him up more and more. He'd hardly manage that from inside a cell.

Away!

Was he, Hans Weigert, hitherto a law-abiding citizen, to evade the clutches of the authorities investigating a double murder? Pure terror had seized him; he was barely able to think straight. Panic set in. It had always been a nightmare for him to be locked up in a prison, where days simply slipped by whilst life outside carried on without him. And whilst he slowly went mad in his eight square metres with a barred view.

The panic had now completely overwhelmed him. Away, yes, away for now! No cell, no interrogations.

And one last chance to sort the matter out.

He jumped up. From the study into the hall, cupboard open,
travel bag out. Back into the study. Documents stuffed into the bag, the two CDs into a side pocket. Desk drawer open: passport, driving licence, wallet, credit cards. Back into the hall: underpants, socks, two shirts. Get dressed. Bathroom: toothbrush, towel.
Everything was happening at breakneck

speed, yet as if in a trance. They could be

here any moment. Get out of here!

His car was parked outside the house. A glance out of the window: nothing out of the ordinary to be seen.

Shoes on, door shut, downstairs, the travel bag in one hand, the other clutching a coat that was dragging along the floor.

Looked left, looked right. Nothing! ... Nothing yet!

With hurried movements, Weigert unlocked the car, threw the
travel bag onto the passenger seat, the coat on top of it, let himself

, slammed the door shut and set off. Away, let's get out of here!

66

Bolzano, 1 December

Europe has – at least – two sides: the north and the south. Both parts strike different chords in people's souls
resonate, eliciting different tones from them and thus not only giving rise to different songs, but also expressing
different mentalities, ways of life and cultures. Yet both – the cool, reserved North and the warm, lively South – are parts of a common whole, two sides of a coin bearing the name 'Europe'.

Where north and south merge, on the imaginary midline of the continent, which manifests itself more strongly in people's souls than on maps, there lies Bolzano – no longer in the north, yet not quite in the south.

Weigert threw open the double doors to the balcony. The sun was already high above the mountains, their peaks covered in the dazzling white of the snow. Further down, on the slopes, the green of the conifers dominated. He took a deep breath, drawing the fresh, crisp air into his lungs, and squinted to shield his eyes from the glaring sunlight. It was surprisingly warm for the already
advanced stage of the season.

He stepped out onto the balcony and looked out over the small town, whose beautiful streets and alleyways were bustling with the lively activity of midday. He loved this town. Whenever he was here, the lines of a song he'd picked up years ago and whose title he didn't know came to mind: "I wasn't born there, but maybe I'll die there."

Perhaps, yes, perhaps one day he would want to breathe his last here. You couldn't choose the place where you were born, but perhaps the place where you died. You just had to be a bit lucky.

"Good morning!"

Claudia Apollonio stood in the open balcony door, her smile vying with the sun's rays for brightness.

"Well, how are you?"

Sometimes a simple question could set complicated processes in motion. He'd left Vienna in a hurry, parked the car somewhere shortly afterwards, then travelled aimlessly by train through the countryside, spending a night in a hayloft. What to do? He'd considered various options, then dismissed them.

Finally, the decision: Claudia, Bolzano. It was a good thing there were no longer any passport controls in the European Union.

The day had actually started pleasantly. But now, five minutes after getting up, it was all back again. Sometimes you really shouldn't set foot out of bed.

"Ah... it's all right."

"That certainly sounds full of energy. How about breakfast to start with?"

The thought of prosciutto crudo, perhaps with a bit of melon, some crispy croissants –

chocolate, of course – and a strong espresso had a certain appeal. "Why not?"

"Right then, follow me discreetly, Signore Weigert."

That was Claudia: always cheerful and bubbly, a resounding ‘yes’ to life. And that was exactly what he had appreciated about her from the very first moment. The very first moment: that had been when he’d met her twelve years ago at John Hopkins University in Bologna. True to the motto “Oops, here I come”, she had walked into a lecture theatre where the class had long since begun. There was a seat free next to Weigert. With the words “Well, all on your own, young man?”, she had sat down without waiting for a reply. It had been the start of a long friendship.

Claudia wasn’t really pretty; at the very least, she didn’t have the sort of looks that would have stood up to a democratic vote.
“Not exactly a stunner,” Weigert had once said to her without thinking, which had earned him a few days of deliberate snubbing.

Women were just like that.

She had straight, brown hair that was long enough to cover part of her back. Her face was what one might call ‘lovely’, in much the same way as it
.

67

She was rather petite, though this did nothing to detract from the truly striking effect she had on people. Her figure fell somewhere in the broad grey area between slim and plump.

Sometimes this bothered her, which manifested itself in a strict refusal to eat, yet at other times she indulged uninhibitedly in whatever

culinary delights on offer.

Three days of the seminar had passed. Hans Weigert and Claudia Apollonio had had a great deal of fun. They had taken little in of the knowledge presented. Just as their professor was delving into the depths of monetarism, she had invited him to visit her in Bolzano one of the coming weekends. Weigert had the audacity to ring his friend Villiger and bring him along as well. “No problem,” she had said, and the three of them had had a marvellous time. Since then, Weigert had come to understand what she, who had spent every weekend travelling from Bologna to Bolzano, found so appealing about this small town.

"Blood is thicker than water," Claudia had once said, thereby expressing one of those apparent contradictions that made her so fascinating. She was, in fact, a cosmopolitan: she had grown up in a blend of German and Italian culture. Despite her Italian name, she was one of five children of German parents. She had studied for a few semesters in the USA and later lived in London for a year. She loved to travel and did so frequently, which her allowed her to do so from her early youth.

When Weigert had once asked her, during one of his many visits to Bolzano, where she considered herself to belong, she had smiled: “German is German, and Walser is Walser,” she had replied. She, although a self-proclaimed anti-fascist and avowed left-winger, knew no ambiguities when it came to her innermost feelings. Every year, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, she would ski down to the huge bonfires. None of this, however, prevented her from having numerous Italian friends. That was just the way she was, and Weigert liked it.

“Another croissant, my dear? You’ve only had two. You don’t usually get up until you’ve polished off five of them.”

Weigert didn’t find it hard to answer; after all, he’d hardly eaten anything in the last two days.

“What are you going to do now?”

Claudia put a fresh batch of pastries into the oven. Weigert took a sip of his espresso. Yesterday, when he'd arrived at her place,
he'd told her his story in every detail. He knew he could trust her implicitly. Even if they put out a warrant for his arrest, she wouldn't let anything slip. Hans or the police – the decision was a very easy one for her. Besides, she was a journalist herself. After her time in London, she'd ended up at a private radio station in Bolzano. She, too, felt that a big story was on the cards.

"First of all, I must finally ring Peter and persuade him to sort out the two CDs. And then I suppose I owe Hillgruber an explanation. He's always looked after me and will be rather disappointed now."

The decision had been made: he simply had to carry on. Events had decided for him.

"They'll be looking for you, Hans. And it's only a matter of time before they track me down."

Claudia looked pensive as she placed two more croissants on his plate. Of course, he'd dragged her into this. But what choice had he had?

"Our house, up on the hill—you know the one. You'd best stay there. If the cops turn up with a search warrant, it'll probably only apply to my flat. The house officially belongs to my parents. I'm assuming you want to carry on. Or am I wrong about that?"

"No, you're not wrong. What else is there for me to do?"

"Good. Just don't let it get you down. So we'll take a few precautions.

Giuseppe will buy a mobile phone in his name, in case the cops get the idea of tapping my lines. Meanwhile

While you're up on the mountain, I'll be down here making sure I get hold of all the necessary materials.

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We need to find out everything about Volker and Greenspan, not forgetting that Frenchman. You, poor lad, will keep a low profile up there in the meantime and plough through the stuff I'm bringing back."

She'd thought of everything. Sitting around twiddling her thumbs wasn't her style. Better to do something than avoid it—that was her motto.

"I'll take a couple of weeks' holiday for this. That way I can devote myself entirely to this story.

I reckon that'll be far more interesting than reporting on local council meetings and fire brigade fairs."

Two instead of one – that would make the work considerably easier, especially as his freedom of movement was currently restricted.
If Villiger were to join them as well, there would be three of them. Claudia liked Peter very much. She just hadn't understood why he wanted to emigrate to Norway.

Actually an unbeatable team, thought Weigert. Claudia would be the soul who drove and inspired the others; Peter the man for the rough stuff, who wouldn't shy away from dangerous situations, the body, so to speak; and he, Weigert, would be the mind, analysing, evaluating and connecting information

analysed, evaluated and linked. He didn't take himself entirely seriously as he thought this, but he liked it.

"While you ring Peter and sort out the matter with Hillgruber, I'll go and do the shopping.

After all, you don't want to starve. And you can't do without your Single Highland Malt anyway."

She was refreshingly direct.

"All right. Let's get on with it then."

Weigert got up to go into the living room, where the telephone was. "I'll do

the washing-up."

"That's a new one. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have bought a dishwasher."

Weigert was surprised that the connection went through on the first try.

"Villiger Hermitage." No

doubt about it, it was Peter.

"Hans here. What's new in Norway?"

"It's absolutely brilliant. There's plenty of space here and, best of all, no people constantly chatting you up."

"Are you suggesting I'm chatting you up?"

"No, of course not. I'm just assuming you can't stand being on your own in Vienna any longer. So you're giving me a call. But if you think I can just pop round for a quick beer, I'm afraid I'll have to
disappoint you."

"I’m not in Vienna."

“Where then? On another one of your pleasure trips that you always call business trips?”

“Unfortunately not. I’m with Claudia.”

“So it is a pleasure trip after all.”

Weigert briefly told Villiger what had happened since he’d left Vienna.

“You’re really in a right mess, old chap.”

“Quite right, and to get out of it, I need you.” “Me? Now you’re

exaggerating. What am I supposed to do?”

“I found two CDs on that French bloke. Both are packed full of all sorts of data.”

"My problem is, I can't get hold of the stuff. I don't even know if it's a computer problem or if it's encrypted. To find that out and crack it, I need you."

There was silence at the other end of the line.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, of course.”

Villiger seemed to be thinking.

“So you seriously expect me to let work ruin the start of my new life?”

69

“What do you mean, work? I thought that sort of thing was a pleasure for you. Besides, the whole thing will only take a couple of days at most.”
"Either you make it or you don't. Then you can go

back to the wilderness."

"Tell him we’ll cover the cost of his flight tickets." Claudia had poked her head through the living room door.

“And our little South Tyrolean says to tell you that we’ll pay for the flight. We’ve already chilled the Budweiser.”

“Sounds good. But seriously now. Do you really think the data on the CDs contains anything important? Who knows, maybe there’s just a few games on there or his personal accounts.”

“And he’d surely bury those in a flowerpot?” “Apparently there are

people like that. I mean, I…”

"Listen, Peter. It’s my only chance right now. They want to arrest me for double murder. And if they want to do that, even though
there’s no evidence to suggest I’m guilty of it according to the
"If I’ve got anything to do with criminal law, they must have had something in mind. Once I’m in a cell, my hands will be tied. I can’t tell you what’s on the CDs. Maybe it’s just nonsense. But I have to give it a go."

“You mean I have to try?”

"Fine, you should try."

"You always need someone to pull you out of the mire. You're away for a couple of days and you're up to no good."

"I…"

"Spare me the soap-box speeches. You can keep the tickets. Better buy a second fridge and fill it with more Budweiser."

Weigert knew Villiger well enough to know he'd got him where he wanted him. His friend wouldn't let him down. Weigert almost felt a warm glow in his heart.

"You can count on it. When will you be there?" "The day after tomorrow

might work. Don't forget the second fridge." "Don't worry. See you

soon."

Weigert hung up.

"So, did he take the bait?"

Claudia was already ready to leave.

"Yes. He reckons he can be there the day after

tomorrow." She was delighted.

"The triumvirate is reforming. I can hardly wait."

Sometimes Weigert had the impression that she wanted more from Villiger than just his friendship.

But she would never admit to anything like that.

"I'm setting off now. Don't do anything silly in the meantime."

“Hold on. We’ll need a proper computer too. As you know, Peter refuses to work on run-of-the-mill machines.”

“No problem, a friend of mine is the general agent for an IT company. We can borrow something decent from there. For now, that thing upstairs will have to do for you. Ciao, see you later.”

She slammed the door behind her.

Now came the more unpleasant part: Hillgruber. Weigert had clearly caused his department head a great deal of trouble. He held Hillgruber in high regard. That didn’t make things any easier.

But it had to be done. He dialled the number for *Der

Blatt*. “Hello, Doctor. Hans Weigert speaking.”

“Weigert! Where are you? People are looking for you!”

“I know. But I’ve got nothing to do with the matter, at least not in a legal sense.”

“Then why on earth have you gone and disappeared?”

“Nobody has any interest in letting me continue my investigations. Can you promise me that you’ll keep what I’m about to tell you absolutely to yourself?”

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Hillgruber hesitated

briefly. “All right, I

can.”

“I mean, nothing about this will appear in the papers?”

He now had to give Hillgruber a heads-up, despite the promise his police friend Müller had extracted from him. He could only hope that Hillgruber was truly trustworthy.

“All right, that too.”

"Listen carefully: something is seriously amiss within the police and the UN intelligence service in Vienna. Following the assassination of Volker, the UN officials have been questioning everyone who saw the body.

And they’ve threatened them, saying that if anyone lets slip anything about the condition of Volker’s body, there’ll be serious consequences for them. I’ve got this from an absolutely reliable source.

If they’re using methods like that over there, they won’t be gentle with me either. And the politicians, like the Home Secretary, are playing along obediently. Bergmann is clearly worried about his newspaper’s reputation. He doesn’t want a conflict. Only if I stick with this now do I have a chance of finding something out and proving that I’m not involved in the the murders in Wewelsburg. Do you understand?” Hillgruber didn’t

respond; the question was rhetorical anyway.

“I take note of what you’re telling me. But you can imagine that I will, discreetly of course, look into it. And as for Bergmann: he dismissed you when he heard that you were being sought.”

So it had finally happened. Weigert had lost his job. It didn’t particularly bother him; if anything, he would have been surprised if things had turned out any differently.

“Do you intend to remain on the run forever? They’ll catch you eventually. Your behaviour will only incriminate you then.”

Hillgruber's voice had taken on a pleading tone. "Where are you, anyway?"

For a moment, Weigert considered telling him. But what would he have gained from it?

Hillgruber may have had a certain amount of sympathy for him, but he wouldn't be able to afford to remain silent in this case. And anyway, what would Hillgruber gain from it? Even sympathy had its limits; at the latest, when murder was suspected.

"I'm safe for now. I'll carry on and I'll get my story. I'm sorry for causing you trouble."

"Causing me trouble? Don't worry about that – I'm just your boss. Your troubles are big enough as it is, and I think they're going to get even bigger. If you do change your mind, let me know. Perhaps there's something I can do for you."

"Thanks for the offer. Once I've got my story, you can print it."

Hillgruber had to smile.

"God forbid, Bergmann would never allow that. No matter how good it is."

"All the same, thank you very much for everything you've done for me at the 'Blatt'."

"There's no need to thank me for that. I hired you back then because I thought you might make a good journalist. As it turns out, I wasn't entirely wrong. You might well be onto something big. If you've got it, you know how to get the story out there, even without the *Blatt*."

It was time to end the conversation.

“I have to go now. I’ve got a lot of work waiting for me.”

“Wait a moment. I’ve got something else for you that might interest you.

We haven’t published it in the ‘Blatt’ yet, and I don’t know if it’s of any significance.”

Weigert pricked up

his ears. “What is

it?”

“We were looking for a parallel between the two murders of Volker and Greenspan and found none, apart from the manner of the killings. Our correspondent in New York has now discovered that there might be something. It turns out that Volker and Greenspan did have something in common after all.”

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Weigert held his breath in suspense.

“Both were members of Masonic lodges.”

Freemasons! The story was getting more and more complicated, branching off in
in numerous directions. Weigert had no idea what to make of it. He only knew that the work ahead of him was piling up.

“As I said, I have no idea whether it means anything. For a report in

'Blatt', it seems a bit too thin to me at the moment.”

“Thank you, in any case, for telling me. I’ll try to find out more about it.

Well then, goodbye, Doctor.”

“Don’t do anything foolish, Weigert, and take care of yourself. I hope you bring this matter to a successful conclusion. Good luck!”

“Thanks, I could do with it.”

Weigert had no idea yet just how right he was to say that.

72

Bolzano, 3 December

Peter Villiger eyed the black cube with its flat screen inside rather suspiciously at first. Then he sat down in front of it, switched it on and reached for that little appendage of the machine that people still affectionately called a mouse. Three minutes later, he turned round.

Weigert was already getting quite restless. He held out the two CDs to Villiger.

“Can we finally get started?”

“Right then, let’s get to work.”

Villiger slid one of the silver discs into the designated slot. Once again, the mouse sprang into action, allowing him to convey his commands to the machine. Suddenly, he groaned and clapped his hands over his face.

“You really are a complete novice, Hans!” “Does that

mean you’ve got it?”

“Not yet.” “But?”

Weigert couldn’t stand it any longer.

"The files on this CD were created using an ancient
word processing programme."

This Frenchman must have been working on an outdated computer, whose operating system works differently from that of modern devices.
That’s all.”

"So, if we get hold of the right software, we can read the stuff too?"

"Exactly."

“Come on, let’s try the second CD.”

Villiger repeated the process. The result was the same as before. “Right. Let’s

have a beer first and wait for Claudia. When
she’s here, she should get in touch straight away with her friend who lent us this device. He’ll sort out the software for us.”

The two went into the kitchen. Just as Weigert opened the fridge to take out two Budweisers, there were

He could hear noises coming from the front door. Villiger stepped out into the hallway to see what was going on. It was Claudia.

“Well, look at that, the emigrant’s here already!”

She threw her arms round Villiger’s neck and kissed him. Weigert watched the scene with amusement. His friend wasn’t much of a fan of such greetings. They usually embarrassed him. Villiger lifted Claudia up and set her down again on a chest of drawers standing against the wall in the hall.

“Not so boisterous, South

Tyrolean!” “How are you?”

“How’s one supposed to feel when this bungler here” – Villiger pointed at Weigert –

“has been specially summoned here from Norway because he can’t even get to grips with the simplest things in the binary world.”

"Exactly, nothing works without you. Desirable men just have to make sacrifices."

Claudia beamed at him. Weigert handed his friend a Budweiser. The three of them sat down in the living room, where a fire in the open fireplace radiated cosy warmth.

“I suggest we discuss how to proceed.” “Has Hans already told you the

whole story in full detail?”

“Yes.”

“And? Have you at least had a look at the two CDs yet?”

“Sure. The results were quite positive. The files were written using only an old word processor and an old

operating system. That's why Hans – and, until now, I too – couldn't read them. All we need are the following programmes."

Peter took a piece of paper and a pen and jotted down what was needed. Then he handed it to Claudia.

"Give your IT guy a ring and tell him to get hold of those programmes for us. As soon as possible. Then we can finally see what's on the CDs."

"It looks as though you're worth your salt after all."

73

"Possibly. But what we're dealing with right now is purely a computer problem. Once we've cleared that hurdle, there might still be other issues."

"What on earth are you on about

now?" Weigert looked sceptical.

"Who's to say that Martin hasn't encrypted his files? If he's already keeping the CDs in a flowerpot, that seems only logical to me."

"Well, after all, we brought you in for this, not so much as a computer expert."

"What trust."

One more sip and Villiger's Budweiser was empty.

"Fancy another one?"

Villiger held the bottle out towards Weigert. “Silly

question.”

Whilst Peter went to fetch the beer, Claudia was on the phone with her acquaintance. He had the software she needed. After a few pleasantries from Claudia, he promised to come round straight away.

Twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Weigert and Villiger stayed in the living room so they wouldn’t be seen. Claudia sent her acquaintance away again on some pretext. When she entered the living room, she was holding a CD with the necessary programmes in her hand, looking triumphant.

“Right. Let’s get started!”

The two friends were already quite excited. Villiger snatched the disc from her hand and rushed upstairs to where the computer was. Weigert followed close behind. Would his problem be solved now? Would this give him the chance to break out of the vicious circle he had fallen into, to return home, cleared of the suspicion of
murder of two people? Or perhaps, in a few minutes’ time, he would hold in his hands the proof that he was on the right track, and the link between Greenspan, Volker, Martin and Wewelsburg would be revealed. And then he, Hans Weigert, the reviled one, would once again dominate the headlines.

Villiger switched on the computer and popped the CD containing the requested programmes into the drive. Claudia Apollonio and Hans Weigert stood behind him, watching over his shoulder as he worked the mouse and keyboard with intense focus. There was a palpable sense of tension in the air.

“Done. It’s up and running. Where are the discs from our Frenchman?” There

was triumph in Villiger’s voice.

“There!”

Weigert handed him the two CDs he'd found at Martin's. Now they had to reveal their secret!

Villiger inserted the first one into the slot. He pressed a few keys and the screen filled up.

"Shit!"

Villiger's fist slammed down on the table. Weigert leaned forward to get a better look. The screen displayed nothing but a jumble of characters.

"Just as I thought: it's all encrypted!"

Peter seemed to take it personally. Claudia remained silent. Disappointment was written all over Weigert's face.

"Come on, let's try the second one!"

"I'd be surprised if it looked any different."

Villiger was right. Everything on the second data carrier was encrypted too.

"What now?"

"I'll be happy to tell you, my friend. Now the hard graft begins."

"How long might that take?"

"It might take days, it might take weeks. And I can't guarantee the result."

Claudia had flopped down onto a small sofa that stood against the wall next to the computer.

"Don't despair, comrades. We've still got plenty of other things to do. Hans, you've got the best overview. What can the two of us do

while Peter’s hunched over the screen?”

Weigert was dejected. But he clung to the hope that his friend would make it.

74

“We must now focus on two things: as I gather from today’s newspapers, a letter of claim from the Islamic People’s Front has now also been received regarding the Greenspan assassination.

So we’ll have to look into that more closely. The second thing is Hillgruber’s tip, according to which both Volker and Greenspan are said to have been Freemasons. In that case, we could...”

Claudia interrupted him.

"I appreciate what you’re saying, but there are a few snags." "And what are

they?"

"Our hands are tied. You, Hans, have to keep a low profile here, so you can’t do any research, but only analyse the material I bring over. As for the Islamic People’s Front, I don’t hold out much hope.
All I can do is interview a few terrorism experts or speak to one or two Muslim politicians. Hundreds of journalists have already had that idea. It’s hardly likely that I’ll be able to find out anything that others haven’t already managed to uncover. And that’s exactly what we can read and hear in the media anyway.”

"That leaves us with the Freemasons."

"We seem to have this lead exclusively, along with Hillgruber, of course. But since your boss at the *Blatt*

hasn’t published anything about it yet, there are two explanations: either the story’s too flimsy, or he’s lied to you.”

“Why would he have done that?”

"It may well be that there was no malicious intent behind it. Since Hillgruber must have expected you to dig deeper, he perhaps just wanted to take you out of the direct line of fire.

But perhaps he already knows more himself and wants you to waste time. So he’s leading you down a trail that goes nowhere.”

"You might be right. Even so, we can’t afford to just let this matter slide. I can’t imagine
that Hillgruber would lie to me like that. And that’s exactly why we have to stay on top of it.”

"Right, you’ve convinced me. So I’ll focus on that. I’ve
I’ve already gathered some information yesterday. Italy seems to be a good place to start. After all, we did have our P-2 scandal.”

Villiger had carried on working whilst Apollonio and Weigert had been talking. Now he interrupted his silent communication with the computer.

“What on earth is that?”

Claudia explained it to him.

"In the early eighties, the whole affair caused quite a stir. Back then, there was a secret society, known as P-2, which was attempting to undermine the state. Its members held key positions in politics, business and the army. When the scandal finally broke, people were surprised to discover just how far their subversive activities had already progressed. I’ll have to look it up myself to find out exactly how it all went down."

“Right. Do that. But what do you intend to do next about Martin?” The

question was directed at Weigert.

"Nothing for the time being. The reason is quite simple. If any of us were to turn up at Wewelsburg, it would very quickly attract the police or the

UN intelligence here. So we can only read what's written about it in the newspapers. And we have to rely on you. You simply have to decipher the records!"

Claudia wasn't very happy with the way things had gone so far.

"Listen, Hans. I don't really need you to help me deal with the Freemasons and the Islamic People's Front. And Peter can play on the computer by himself. In the meantime, you could
do something more productive."

"And what, if I may ask?" Weigert

felt attacked.

"You've forgotten one more lead: Tibet and that Karl Steiner the Frenchman told you about.

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We've no idea what that's all about, but if Martin, on his deathbed, had nothing better to do than tell you that name, then it must be important."

"Your ideas are brilliant. Do you know what happens to me if I show my passport at an airport? Then it's all over! I'm wanted by the police, my dear!"

"Who said anything about you having to show your passport?"

"Should I perhaps board as cargo, with a sticker saying 'Sample – no value'?"

Claudia laughed.

“That’s a good idea. But mine’s better. Even though we’re in South Tyrol, we’re still in Italy. If, like me, you come from a well-respected family that isn’t exactly struggling to make ends meet, then you’ve got your contacts. Getting you new papers shouldn’t be a problem. I know someone. It won’t exactly be cheap, but money worries have never plagued me. We’ll dye the little chap’s hair, put a pair of glasses on his nose, and he’ll be as good as new.”

"You can’t be serious! I’ll be glad just to get out of this mess, and you want me to add a few more offences to my list of charges! And even if I did, what am I supposed to
do? Drive to that monastery and ask for a Karl Steiner? What if they just stare at me blankly and say, ‘What sort of
Steiner?’”

“Then you’ll just come back home. It’s as simple as that.” Now

Villiger had to put his two cents’ worth in as well.

"If I may interject here: she’s right, Hans. You’d hardly be able to help here. And the lead to Tibet needs to be followed up anyway, as far as I can tell. You can’t wait until I’ve finished with the CDs here. I might not manage it. What then? Volker, Greenspan and the Islamic People’s Front: that might just about work out.
But Martin and this Wewelsburg are the big unknowns in this game. Just give it a go!”

“And to achieve that, you’d even accept help from criminals and get me false papers?”

Claudia couldn’t let that pass.

“Now, now. If you were to apply Austrian standards in Italy, you’d have to lock up half the population. What’s the harm in enlisting the help of an artist? A bit of document forgery is a piece of cake compared to the potential gain.”

“You said it: *potential* profit – nothing’s certain.”

"Do you perhaps have a better suggestion than sitting here reading the stuff I’ve brought along? I’m interested in the story and I really want to help you. But ultimately, it’s about you, so you’ve got to put in some effort yourself! You don’t get anything for free.

Risk is part of life. And a properly forged passport isn’t even a risk."

Weigert was in a tight spot. He really couldn’t just let the others do the work for him whilst he sat by the fire drinking Budweiser. But what was unfolding had little to do with journalism anymore. Wasn’t that what he’d always wanted? To take action himself instead of just writing about the actions of others? Now he had it. He didn’t feel comfortable with it.
Weigert tried one last way out.

“Where am I supposed to get the cash for this trip? If I turn up somewhere with my credit card, it’s only a matter of time before they’ve got me. I...”

Claudia placed her hand on his shoulder.

“As for money, leave that to me. That certainly won’t be the reason your trip to Tibet falls through.”

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Tibet, 7 December

“It’s up there.”

The Sherpa pointed towards a mountainside. Weigert had to force himself to look up. He was exhausted. His legs ached, his head felt as if it were being pricked by needles, and his lungs were working flat out to draw in the little oxygen that remained at just under 4,000

metres.

Weigert had flown from Rome to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, via a roundabout route. He had barely managed to suppress his fear as he passed through customs. When he was asked to open his luggage in Lhasa, Weigert had already thought he’d been caught. Yet no one
objected to the fake passport Claudia had got him. Weigert was only unhappy about his light brown-dyed hair. But he could live with that. The main thing was that they hadn’t caught him. At least not yet. First, he had to follow his own trail.

From Lhasa, he had then set off for Tashi Lhunpo. At the monastery, Weigert had laboriously made his way up the ranks to the highest-ranking monk. Only a few of the monks spoke English. But in the end, he had managed it. And then the surprise. The
The monastery elder, dressed entirely in yellow, had at first merely smiled when Weigert asked about Karl Steiner. Then he had slowly nodded and fetched one of the monks. A few minutes later, Weigert had a Sherpa who spoke passable English. The next day, they had set off to tackle the arduous journey to Karl Steiner.

Weigert had regretted coming here dozens of times since then. Never before had he felt as tired and worn out as he did now. Every time they stopped, he had to force himself to carry on. Never again, he had sworn to himself each time. And they had stopped often.

Mechanically, like a robot, he had put one foot in front of the other, sometimes slipping and falling. The Sherpa had then had to help him up time and again. On his own, he would scarcely have mustered the strength or the will to do so.

Somewhere up there was Karl Steiner, a man he didn't know, a man whose role in the cruel game Weigert had become entangled in he had no idea about. A dying man had revealed this name to him. But what was the significance of it? Did he have anything to do with the murders of Pierre Martin and his wife? Did he know more about the attacks on Volker and Greenspan? What if Steiner couldn't help him? And what if Steiner couldn't help him wanted to?

Weigert had given up asking himself such questions hours ago. They had cropped up hundreds of times, yet he had never been able to answer them. At some point, he had simply grown too tired for it. The answer lay up there, on the slope of a steep mountain –

perhaps...

Infinitely slowly, as if in slow motion, Weigert's gaze followed the Sherpa's outstretched hand.

Snow clung to the right lens of his glacier goggles, obstructing his view. As Weigert raised his arm to wipe it off, it felt as though his muscles were made of lead. Inch by inch he pulled it higher, offering his last resistance to gravity, which seemed overwhelming, then the sleeve of his anorak had reached the tinted lenses. Two or three movements and his arm fell back down.

It hadn't helped much. Where the snow had been, there were now damp smudges on the lens. One eye saw everything as if through a soft-focus filter.

Through his tinted glasses, the white of the snow all around was distorted into a blue that occasionally veered towards grey. Weigert could

barely bear the colour. For hours he had seen nothing but this one colour. Hardly anything had appeared in the landscape to break the monotony. Soon he would go mad,
thought Weigert.

The sun was just breaking through the gigantic cloud formations towering over the mountains. Its rays made the snow glisten, as if it were sending its greetings before climbing the final stretch up to the height of midday. The sun... the black sun... that was why Weigert was here.

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Up there lay the end of his journey, perhaps. Or perhaps it would merely be a stopover. The thought that it might only be a beginning did not occur to Weigert. His brain could no longer process thoughts. It merely coordinated the most essential biological processes in his body, struggling to keep going when it would far rather have given up long ago.

300, perhaps 400 metres ahead of the two men, something dark could be made out on the slope.

Weigert narrowed his eyes, opened them again and tried to look more closely. It was a small stone house nestled between several rocks, as if seeking shelter from the elements. Next to it, in the snow, a yellow patch was visible.

Weigert assumed, at least, that it must be yellow. The tinted glacier goggles prevented him from perceiving the colour accurately.

Weigert closed his eyes once more, opened them again and focused all his remaining concentration on the view. A person sitting in the snow, wrapped in yellow fabric. Steiner? Possibly; no one else was visible.

“Steiner.” The Sherpa’s voice snapped Weigert out of his thoughts. Without adding a word, without so much as a gesture,
Weigert’s guide set off.

300 metres, perhaps even 400. Weigert knew he could do it, now that he had his goal in sight.

The sun was still visible. Majestically, it had carved out a space for itself between the clouds to demonstrate its mysterious power. Looking up, one could sense the heat it radiated into space, despite the biting cold down here. And yet, here it was far too weak to melt the snow. In this place, the ice seemed to triumph over the fire.

Just a few dozen metres to go. Weigert could now make out the man clearly. He was crouching in the snow, his legs crossed as in yoga, his forearms resting on his thighs. His grey-white hair was thick but cut short. His eyes were closed, his face tanned, the work of the sun up here. A profound sense of calm and serenity emanated from the man.

Weigert tried to guess the man’s age. The carefree spirit of youth, which Weigert longed for time and again, was behind the man, long gone, if one considered earthly dimensions. Yet the frailty of old age seemed still to lie ahead of him. He had probably reached that liminal state that lies between birth and death, where a man rears up to turn back the wheel of time once more before accepting his inevitable fate, so as to perceive the burden of ageing not as a burden but as a new challenge. No younger than 45, no older than 55, Weigert estimated.

Steiner's face was well-defined. It had the features that made it not too difficult for its owner to attract women. A few small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, usually attributed to frequent laughter, a prominent chin, thin eyebrows that were gently turning grey to match the colour of his hair. Had the man not been sitting here in the mountainous wilderness of Tibet, one might have taken him for a successful businessman.

But Weigert was puzzled. Steiner was wearing nothing but a thin, yellow robe and simple shoes. No hat, no gloves, nothing to protect him from the cold. Minus 15 degrees, Weigert estimated.

He must have heard him and the Sherpa long ago, yet he showed no reaction whatsoever, but simply sat motionless in the snow, eyes closed, breathing very slowly and deeply. Steiner and the mountains – they were simply there. The two people who had made the long, arduous journey here played no part. Steiner and the mountains – they would still be there long after the two people had gone. They were the
constant in time, like the North Star, which remained motionless whilst everything spun around it.

"Karl … Steiner…?"

The words came softly and slowly from Weigert's lips. That was all he could manage. Then he felt only emptiness; his legs buckled and he sank into the snow. Before Weigert lost consciousness, he thought he heard a voice speaking German.

"I've been waiting for you, Mr Weigert."

Weigert opened his eyes and looked around. There were colours, real colours, the sort he'd missed on his trek through the monotonous grey-blue. His glacier goggles were gone. He realised he was lying on a bed, wrapped in the cosy warmth of his down sleeping bag. The little stone hut... Someone had carried him in. Weigert had no idea how long he'd been lying there.

It seemed dark outside, but the interior of the hut was lit by the glow of an old paraffin lamp.

A few steps from the bed, the man who had been sitting outside in the snow was fiddling with a small propane stove. He was still wrapped in his loose-fitting yellow robe, which reached down to his ankles , interrupted only by a sort of fabric belt wrapped twice around his hips. There was no sign of the Sherpa who had accompanied Weigert.

"How are you, Mr Weigert?"

Steiner's rich, deep voice sounded friendly and slightly concerned. He spoke German – without a discernible accent.

So Weigert had not been mistaken. Steiner did indeed know his name. Only Peter Villiger and Claudia Apollonio knew that he had set off for Tibet. He had travelled on the false passport that Claudia had obtained for him. And he had not given a name to the monks he had asked in Tashi Lunpo about Steiner's whereabouts.

"How do you know who I am?" "Do I

need to give a reason?"

Steiner continued to fiddle with the small stove. "I

just know."

"But only two people know that I'm in Tibet."

Weigert sat up in bed, still wrapped in his sleeping bag. Apart from the ache in his muscles, he felt quite well again.

Steiner looked at him. Weigert noticed that he had light blue eyes. The look in them hinted at the strong will hidden behind them.

“There are things, Mr Weigert, that you cannot understand, no matter how hard you try.”

“Or things you don’t want to tell me.”

Steiner did not reply, but placed a kettle filled with water on the propane stove.

Then he sprinkled in something that looked like herbs.

Weigert had come here because he had accepted the challenge that fate had set before him. He wanted to find out something, but he didn’t know where or how to begin. Pierre Martin had mentioned Steiner’s name to him on his deathbed. He decided to start there.

“How did you know Pierre Martin?”

Steiner seemed pleased with how the tea-making was going. He sat down on a ledge in the wall, directly opposite Weigert.

“Martin found me, just as you found me.”

“Found? Does that mean you’re hiding out here?” Steiner smiled, but said

nothing.

“You’re not very talkative. Well, no wonder for a man who seeks the solitude of these mountains.”

“Words are merely one way of communicating something.”

“The things I want to know can only be communicated through words.”

“The things you want to know cannot be put into words.” “I’m glad

you seem to know my wishes.” Weigert thought for a moment.

“Karl Steiner, is that correct?”

"There was a time when people used to call me that. Here in Tibet, people wouldn’t know what to make of a name like that. Only in Tashi Lhunpo do they recognise it."

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Why all the secrecy? If Steiner had known he was coming, he could have slipped away in time. Since he’d stayed, Weigert assumed he wanted to speak to him too. But perhaps he just wanted to know exactly what Weigert was after, so he could then subject him to the same fate as Martin.

Weigert had factored this possibility in. He hadn’t taken it particularly seriously. Yet he had taken precautions. In his rucksack was the small pistol he’d bought in Lhasa. And his rucksack was standing next to the bed. It didn’t look as though anyone had tampered with it whilst he was asleep.

“How did you actually get here?”

"If I start telling you this, Weigert, you'll be stepping onto ground you might never be able to leave again."

The man spoke in riddles. Or was that supposed to be a threat? Weigert glanced at his rucksack.

"Perhaps we should start with something simpler. Where are you from?"

"From Germany. Though from a Germany you only know from history books."

Weigert thought for a moment. Steiner was probably ten to twenty years older than him. So the time he was talking about could only be the period before the reunification of the Federal Republic with the GDR, which had taken place in 1990

. "West or East?"

Steiner's face remained impassive. "Neither." "What

do you mean, neither?"

"I came here from Germany in 1942." "As a child?"

"No. As a young man."

"Impossible! That would mean you'd have to be over 90

years old!" "91, to be precise."

Was Steiner pulling his leg? The man certainly didn't look 91. Weigert decided to leave it at that for the time being, especially as he had the impression that Steiner was being serious.

"Let's assume you're telling the truth. Although I must say that for a man of 91, you look very young

..."

“As I said: there are things you cannot understand.”

“So let’s assume you’re telling the truth. I can certainly understand what might drive a man to flee Nazi Germany, but for the life of me I can’t think of a single reason why he would end up in Tibet of all places.”

“You’re mistaken, Weigert. I didn’t flee back then.” “You

didn’t flee?”

“No. I was a member of a German expedition.” “A

researcher, then?”

"In a way, yes."

He raised his hand as Weigert began to speak. It was Steiner’s turn now, that must have been the implication.

“If research means striving for knowledge, then my comrades and I were researchers, albeit only to a limited extent in the classical sense.
There were 13 of us when we set out from Berlin on 7 July 1942

from Berlin. We were selected by the Reichsführer of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, and by Karl Haushofer.”

“Wait a moment!”

Weigert simply interrupted Steiner.

“Does that mean you were a member of the SS?”

“All 13 of us belonged to the Black Order, the SS, as you say.”

Weigert felt a wave of intense heat wash over him: the SS, Wewelsburg, the Black Sun, the assassinations! Volker, the President of the European Central Bank, had been

.

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Greenspan, a member of the UN Security Council, had been killed in New York. Both had had the black sun branded onto their foreheads. The world blamed the Islamic People's Front. And the SS officer Steiner was sitting in the Tibetan mountains, having come from 1942 Germany, and had already been waiting for him.

At that moment, chaos reigned in Weigert's mind. 'Proceed systematically,' he told himself. Weigert wanted to leave the question of the assassinations of Volker and Greenspan for later. First, the
simpler part.

"What was the SS doing in Tibet? Wasn't it busy enough killing people?"

Weigert made no secret of his dislike. He hadn't disliked Steiner before, but now...

"I understand your aversions. After all, you're only a one-time-born."

Steiner smiled. Weigert had no idea what he meant by that.

"Your view of the SS is that of a superficial observer. Not because you might know too little about it. Even if you

were to read every book in the world on the subject, your perspective would not change."

"Do you expect me to approve of what happened back then?"

"That is not the point at all. Good or bad, that is up to you.
It's about things, Weigert, for which there is no place in your mundane worldview."

Steiner said it without any distaste or arrogance; there was a note of indulgence in his voice. He stood up from the ledge, crouched down beside the stove and reached for the handle of the kettle, from which steam was rising. Steiner held the kettle out towards Weigert.

"What do you see?"

Weigert was both bewildered and annoyed. "A

teapot."

"There you have it, Weigert. You see the kettle, but not the hand that holds it, that moves it, that ultimately determines what happens to it.
For the kettle obscures the hand."

"Fine. But what does a teapot have to do with the SS?"

"With the SS, too. But above all with history."

Steiner poured the tea into two earthenware bowls standing on the ground beside the stove. He picked them both up and handed one to Weigert. As Weigert reached for it, he saw the decoration on it: the black sun! Fired into the clay
as if into human skin! Weigert's hand trembled. Some tea dripped onto his sleeping bag.

"What you see in history or politics are events that you can perceive: revolutions, wars, elections, inventions,
ideas. If you seek an explanation for an event, you draw on other events and try to establish causal links. But all these events, too, lie within the limited scope

of your perception. In doing so, you always remain at the level of what you can hear, see, read, comprehend and think. Things that lie beyond this threshold have no significance in the real world in which you believe you are moving – not for you, nor for many others. You are short-sighted, Weigert. You do not recognise the hand behind the teapot, and you only recognise history once it manifests itself in the material world. By then, however, it obeys only the forces that have long since unfolded elsewhere."

"And what forces are these supposed to be? Fate? Providence? God?"

There was a cynical undertone to Weigert's voice. Steiner seemed to ignore it.

"I believe in divine power because I believe in myself and in what I have seen, even if not with the senses with which you
see."

Was Steiner mad? Not in the clinical sense, perhaps, thought Weigert. But perhaps he had been seized by some religious delusion whilst in Tibet. A Buddhist SS man from the Third Reich who had spent decades practising penance in the mountains? Weigert had to find out why he and his comrades had come to Tibet and, perhaps even more importantly, why Steiner was still there.

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“So you and the other men were sent here in 1942, or so you claim. But what was so important about your mission that Himmler personally selected you? Or, to put it another way, what connection existed between the Third Reich and Tibet?”

“Well, I shall first try to remain within the world that is comprehensible to you. There are often things there, before or alongside the major events that you learn about as history, which would be quite accessible to people like you. Yet you consider them insignificant or even overlook them entirely. You probably know the history of the Third Reich as it is generally portrayed. There was a man, gifted as an orator and
Unscrupulous in his methods – Hitler, that is. He had his party, the NSDAP.

And then, of course, there were the so-called circumstances. The economic crisis of the 1920s, Germany’s defeat in the First World War, and so on. All of that together simply resulted in history unfolding as it ultimately did. The NSDAP’s seizure of power, the war, the collapse. Nothing more than a regrettable historical coincidence, so to speak. Is that not the case?”

“Why not? But I asked you about the connection between the Third Reich and Tibet. What about that?”

"First, I tried to present history as you presumably see it. In that view, an SS expedition to Tibet can at best be a bizarre detail on the margins. Pointless, insignificant and negligible. Yet there is also another version of the story. That of the hand behind the teapot. And in this one, Tibet plays a far more significant
role. I’ve already mentioned that, alongside Himmler, Karl Haushof was also involved in selecting the expedition members...”

“Who was that? I’ve never heard that name before.”

"I did say that there are things you simply overlook. And yet you believe you can understand history in this way. Karl Haushofer was one of the most important men of the Third Reich. One of the hands behind the scenes, so to speak. And yet

relatively few people know about him. And even fewer are aware of his true significance. In academic circles, Haushofer has become known for his scholarly work. He is regarded as one of the founders of geopolitics. After the war, he was accused of having inspired Hitler's concepts of Lebensraum. In a certain sense, that is also true, though by no means in the way it is portrayed. Haushofer first visited Tibet long before Adolf Hitler appeared on the political scene in Germany."

"And? What's so significant about that?"

"You wanted to know why I came here. I'm trying to explain it to you."

"Excuse me."

Weigert was so agitated that – contrary to his usual journalistic habits – he didn't really let his interlocutor get a word in edgewise.

"During the First World War, Haushofer established contacts with initiates of the Yellow Hats. The Yellow Hats are a sect founded in 1409 by Tsongkhapa, a Buddhist reformer. To this day, they wield great influence in Tibet. And not only in Tibet. The contacts between Haushofer and the Yellow Hats led to the formation of several Tibetan communities in Germany in the 1920s.
Many of them maintained contacts with key figures in the NSDAP, which was growing in strength at the time. Haushofer had established these connections. After 1933, several expeditions were carried out, primarily at the instigation of the Ahnenerbe. The one I was part of was the last."

"You will understand that I am not as familiar with some things as you are. What was the Ahnenerbe?"

"The Ahnenerbe was a research organisation comprising several dozen institutes. It was under the authority of the SS.

Officially, it was concerned with scientific work in the field of prehistory and early history, primarily, of course, with the Germanic peoples. But those were merely the figureheads for the uninitiated public. Far more important, though far less well-known, were certain departments that dealt with matters you would probably describe as occult."

“May I conclude from this that the actual connection between the Third Reich and the Himalayas was an occult one?”

“Yes, you may.”

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One thing seemed clear: Steiner spoke soberly and matter-of-factly. He had no trouble digging up things from his memory that dated back decades. Nor did he give the impression of being confused in any other way.

What was he trying to say with all that? Weigert pondered.

He’d heard before that Himmler had had a few eccentricities. He’d read in a book that the head of the SS had had his future predicted by the stars. Fair enough,
. So why not a few expeditions to Tibet as well? Admittedly, this aspect of the Third Reich struck him as rather strange. If it was true, that is. After all, Steiner could well be telling him a load of rubbish. But what significance did it really matter? And above all, what did it have to do with Volker, Greenspan or Martin? They *had now* been murdered, decades after the end of the Third Reich.

Weigert took a sip of his tea. One thing at a time, he thought. “What sort of…

occult… connection was that?”

Steiner looked at him as if he were considering what to say next. Five or ten seconds passed, then he spoke.

“We were searching for the beings of Thule.” “Thule?”

“I see the name means nothing to you. And yet I am sure you have heard of it, even if only as a legend.”

“What legend?”

“The legend of Atlantis. Or rather, the truth of Thule.”

Legend? Truth? Atlantis? Had Steiner completely lost his mind? “What

do you mean by that?”

"Twelve thousand years ago, an empire came to an end in a colossal catastrophe the likes of which the world has never seen since. Thule was the empire of a race descended from the gods. This race possessed indescribable knowledge that went far beyond anything known today. Yet it was not knowledge as we understand it today. Modern man has degenerated. He can now only comprehend things that his five senses can perceive. And he can only process these things according to the laws of logic and rationality. The beings from Thule, on the other hand, lived in the spiritual world just as much as in the material world.”

Weigert looked puzzled, but Steiner paid no heed. There was a strange gleam in his eyes. He simply continued.

“Some of the beings from Thule survived the catastrophe described in the Bible as the Flood. They went out into the world and there encountered the dawn of humanity, which was just taking its first steps into history.

They were worshipped as gods, which is no wonder, for they were descended from them.

Their abilities fascinated the people, who could find no explanation for them. But what were the beings of Thule to do with humanity? This question divided the last descendants of the gods.

Some wanted, when the time was right, to make humans their equals. They wanted to bestow upon them the breath of the divine and let them share in their vast knowledge, allowing them to rise to new heights. The others wanted humans to remain as they were.

This group wished to continue being worshipped as gods. To them, humans were nothing more than herds of higher animals in need of shepherds' guidance. They wished to share their divine knowledge with no one, for they considered themselves gods. And so it came to pass that the beings of Thule split into two groups. One group followed the path to the left and, after their oracle, called themselves the Agarthians. The other group, who followed the path to the right and wished to continue being worshipped as gods, were the Shamballans. Both groups, however, even the Shamballans, intermingled with humans over the course of millennia, so that outwardly they came to resemble them more and more. And yet the knowledge handed down from Thule has been preserved to this day.

The two groups, however, Agarthi and Shamballa, have been locked in conflict with one another for millennia.

"And the different fates they have in store for people are the reason for this."

"And if they haven't died, then they are still alive today." Weigert made

no effort to hide his judgement.

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"And how does the story continue? What does it have to do with Tibet?"

"Tibet, because after the catastrophe of Thule, one of the largest surviving groups came to the Himalayan region. As they had no contact with people here for a long time, they preserved their knowledge and abilities longer than the others, who lost much of it.

When they finally encountered people, they chose the path of Agarthi."

A political assassination had been the trigger for a chain of events that had cost Weigert his job, brought him to the brink of arrest, and ultimately led him all the way to Tibet. And now this on top of everything else! His story, which he had hoped to clarify here, was instead becoming increasingly complicated. SS men who clung to a millennia-old myth and sought the remnants of a lost race in Tibet
were searching, whilst out there, in the world he was the only one prepared to acknowledge, things were happening that seemed to be connected with it. How had Steiner put it? You cannot see the hand behind the cauldron.

"You surely think all this is nonsense now, just another legend like so many others. And you're also considering the possibility that I'm telling you lies. Aren't you?"

Steiner raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Yes, I do.”

“Consider the following, Mr Weigert: feel free to regard what I have told you about the Kingdom of Thule as a fairy tale. You may well understand that this is not my view. But were I in your position, I would probably act in exactly the same way. Yet even if you regard what I have just told you merely as a legend, you must bear one thing in mind: this legend, like many
others, is believed by people. And because they believe in it, they base their actions on it. And so what you, Weigert, are at best prepared to acknowledge as a myth is transformed into a world that is tangible even to you. For people, guided by their beliefs, create
Events in that real world, which is accessible to you too. And these events, in turn, influence history as people like
know. And yet their roots extend into a world that, for you, Mr Weigert, simply does not exist.”

Weigert had listened intently. Of course it was a legend. But wasn’t Steiner right in his reasoning, after all?

And yet, viewed in this light, everything was actually both simple and complicated at the same time. Weigert let the thought run its course. What if many figures from history or in today’s politics believed in such things? Then there would scarcely be any action that could lay claim to the concept of rationality. Had not the era from which Steiner came, or claimed to come, also been something profoundly irrational? If that were the case, then the world would be nothing more than a power play of...

"...esoteric ideas."

Weigert started, for Steiner had finished the sentence he had only been thinking.

“What did you just say?” Weigert’s

confusion grew.

“Esoteric ideas. If we assume that significant people believe in such ideas and base their actions on them, then history is no longer merely a contest between peoples, parties or economic forces, but also – and I would say above all – a contest between such ideas. This would at least be a hypothesis that you, who assume that these ideas have no validity in themselves,
."

Had Steiner merely picked up on the same thought by chance? It must surely be so.

“Well, yes…”

“Have you ever doubted the Bible?” “Who hasn’t

doubted it?”

"I’m sorry, my question was a bit vague. I meant to ask whether you’ve ever doubted the power of the Bible, not its content."

Weigert thought for a moment. Steiner continued, a smile playing around his mouth.

“Even if you do not believe in what the Old and New Testaments proclaim, you must admit that Christianity has had a considerable influence on history. If everyone, like you, had not believed in it, such an influence would have been unthinkable.”

Well, Weigert was prepared to go that far. Yet it slowly dawned on him that even this small step, which took him only to the edge of the world he could comprehend and nowhere near beyond it, amounted to a revolution. History and politics as a contest of irrational ideas, simply because people believed in them. The logic that followed from this was too compelling to simply brush aside.

And yet, today, no one seriously considered taking these things into account when explaining historical and political
events. Even he, the political journalist, had never given it a thought. Actually, an unforgivable mistake. Did it really take the sight of the black sun on a dead man's forehead
?

"As you may now understand a little better, Tibet was by no means merely a personal obsession of Himmler's. It was of great importance to the leadership of the Third Reich to look here. And yet it was merely a
tiny piece in a gigantic mosaic." "A mosaic of

destruction."

Weigert had to give vent to his aversion, yet he sensed that his moral considerations, here in the Himalayas, face to face with Steiner, simply held no sway. They were human, yet Steiner spoke of the gods.

"When you speak of annihilation, you surely mean the war and the camps, things you presumably regard as unique in history—in a negative sense, of course. Have you ever considered how it could have come to this?"

Weigert was somewhat surprised by the question. But then it dawned on him that Steiner merely wanted to let him speak, so that a representative of one reality might come to the fore. Then he would set the other—his own reality—against it.

"I assume that my version is different from yours. And I further assume that you are familiar with my version. It coincides with

the one found in the history books. So how about

you start right away?" "You can tell you're a

journalist."

Now that Steiner knew his name, it was hardly surprising that he also knew his profession. Nevertheless, Weigert's unease grew.

"For you, the history of the Third Reich probably begins with the rise of the NSDAP in the 1920s. As late as 1923, when Hitler and his followers marched to the Feldherrnhalle in Munich, the party and its leader were nothing more than a local Bavarian phenomenon. Yet the course for everything that was to come had already been set years earlier: the seizure of power in Germany, the establishment of a
state based on entirely new principles, the drive for expansion in Europe and beyond."

"If I assume that the worldview of Hitler and his most important followers had already taken shape before they entered politics, then that does not strike me as particularly surprising. After all, as far as I know, Hitler was thirty years old when he joined the party."

"You're right about that, but in a completely different sense than you might suppose."

"Could you perhaps be a little more specific?"

"Certainly. On 26 December 1923, whilst Hitler was in prison following the failed putsch, a certain Dietrich Eckart died in Munich. A few minutes before he died, he said: 'Follow Hitler! We have given him the means to make contact with YOU. Do not mourn me, my friends. I shall have had more influence on history than any other German. Hitler will dance, but we have composed the music to his dance.' Eckart was..."

"Dying people say a lot and are not always in full possession of their mental faculties."

Weigert's voice had the tone of a prosecutor arguing for a 'guilty' verdict in court.

"I understand that, as a journalist, you have to ask questions—critical questions. But I don't think we're engaged in a debate here where one person has to convince the other that their view is the correct one. That's impossible anyway, because we come from two different worlds. I know yours very well, but you know
That's not mine. Listen to what I have to say. Think about it, check the facts when you're back in
Europe, and then believe it or dismiss it, as you see fit."

"You can count on that."

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"So: Dietrich Eckart was a poet and writer. Among other things, he wrote a version of 'Peer Gynt' that was much acclaimed at the time. He was a bohemian who enjoyed moving in Munich society. But all that is beside the point. Above all, he was an initiate of the Thule

Society."

“May I assume that the name was borrowed from the legend you first told me?”

"Correct. The Society was founded on 17 August 1918. Its meeting rooms were located in Munich’s ‘Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten’. The founder was a certain Rudolf von Sebottendorf, who, with proper
His name was Rudolf Glauer. Sebottendorf spent many years in the Middle East, where he was in contact with numerous occult societies.
Eventually, he returned to Germany. There he met Hermann Pohl, the Grand Master of the Germanic Order, which he joined. By the
the winter solstice of 1917, Sebottendorf became Master of the Bavarian organisations of this Order. In June 1918, he purchased a newspaper, the Münchner Beobachter, whose editorial offices were also relocated to the ‘Vier Jahreszeiten’. This later gave rise to the Völkischer Beobachter, the party newspaper of the NSDAP, as you are no doubt aware.

Sebottendorf wants his esoteric ideas to exert influence in the real world as well. The Thule Society is intended to become a link between both worlds. It is to serve as a springboard for those who truly seek initiation. At the same time, it is to offer, well, ordinary people the opportunity to identify with it. So, one creates, so to speak, a profane, popular version of genuine knowledge. To gain influence, one approaches, above all, influential figures. One tries to win over politicians, journalists, businessmen, officers, doctors, lawyers and the like for the Thule Society.
And it succeeds. As more and more influential men gather there, others join in order to benefit from the contacts among the lodge brothers. And yet, to a greater or lesser extent, they are united by a shared worldview that Sebottendorf has set out for them and in which they can find themselves.

No wonder, for this mythological worldview is broad enough to allow everyone –

within certain limits, of course – to interpret it as they see fit.
Of course, Sebottendorf did not invent this strategy. If you
politics from this perspective, and you will find that this approach is very frequently employed. It lays the foundation for the later, seemingly sudden

emergence of ideas and organisations. Yet it often began long before, unnoticed by the public and unnoticed too by journalists such as yourself, Mr Weigert.

Soon, the Thule Society came to include many influential members of Munich society. Moreover, however, it also attracted true insiders: Alfred Rosenberg, a friend of Dietrich Eckart and later chief ideologist of the NSDAP; Rudolf Hess, who later became Hitler's deputy; and also Karl Haushofer, of whom I have already told you. I do not wish to bore you further with a list of names, but you may assume that virtually all the figures who influenced the subsequent policies of the NSDAP and the Third Reich were members of the Thule Society or at least closely associated with it.

Ah yes, the NSDAP: as the focal point of these ideas, so to speak the vehicle in the real world, it too is, of course, a creation of the Thule Society. The Thule brothers Anton Drexler and Karl Harrer founded the German Workers' Party in 1919 on the Society's instructions; this was renamed the National Socialist German Workers' Party in February 1920. When Hitler joined the DAP a few months after its founding, he was embedded in a network of Thule members: the managing director was Max Amann. The editor-in-chief of the party newspaper, the Beobachter, was Dietrich Eckart. His deputy was Alfred Rosenberg. Even the party's symbol – the swastika – which would later captivate millions of people, originated in Thule circles.

Sebottendorf had done a thorough job. He had sown the seeds of what was only to blossom in full glory years later. It was time for him to disappear. He himself wrote at the time: 'The Thule Society had served its purpose; it had to pass away so that the new could come into being, which was already on the threshold.'

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With the rise of the NSDAP, the Society lost its formal significance. What had previously gathered within it now gathered within the party. The idea, however, lived on, for it is never so powerless as to remain merely an idea. In 1930, the Thule Society was finally dissolved, and Sebottendorf disappeared. On 9 May 1945, one day after the end of the war in Europe, his body was recovered from the Bosphorus."

Whilst Steiner was speaking, Weigert had taken paper and pencil from his rucksack and begun to take notes. Steiner seemed to have no objection.

"So the gist of what you're telling me is that at the beginning of the NSDAP, and thus effectively also at the beginning of the Third Reich, there was a secret society that derived its activities primarily from esoteric ideas. Wouldn't that mean National Socialism was much more akin to a sect or a religion than a political movement?"

"I see you are beginning to understand. Hermann Rauschning, the former President of the Senate of Danzig, who came to hate the party, wrote on this subject: Every German has one foot in Atlantis, where he owns a rather stately ancestral estate. This dual nature, this ability to live in two worlds, to project the imaginary into the real time and again – all this applies in a special way to Hitler and his magical socialism. For all those who have been short-changed, National Socialism is the dream of great magic.' But who has really taken Rauschning and a few others seriously
? There is probably no historical period that has been researched

and analysed as that of National Socialism. But the historians' worldview is a real one, one of the quantifiable and measurable. Even when they came across things that would have enabled them to look behind the scenes, they drew no serious conclusions from them. Yet they should have taken Hitler, whom they often dismissed, seriously even when he said: 'You know nothing of me; my party comrades have no idea of the dreams that move me and of the magnificent edifice whose foundations will at least be laid when I die. A revolution will take place on earth which you,
the uninitiated, cannot comprehend. What is taking place here is more than the emergence of a new religion; it is the will to create a new humanity.'

Historians can offer only megalomania as an explanation for such and similar statements, because they go beyond the scope of their thinking. The idea that there might have been more behind a man who rose from being a failed painter to become the ruler of Europe
than an unfortunate chain of circumstances never really occurred—or occurs—to them. And if they were actually to grapple with the occult background, they themselves would be accused of
occultism. In a world of rationality, that would be their scientific death sentence."

Weigert had been frantically jotting down notes in his notebook. Only gradually did what had been said seep into his thoughts, connecting there with others and giving rise to new ones.

"Suppose you're right about that. But there's still a major catch to the whole thing."

"And what would that be?"

"Let's assume that the members of such a secret society had indeed planned to create a party and thereby seize power in a country, or perhaps even beyond. I can certainly imagine that, through appropriate mechanisms, they might have managed to gain control of the key levers of power. What I cannot imagine, however, is that such a plan would actually be fully

makes sense. After all, your higher esotericists were operating in the midst of a mundane world. And there are other factors at play as well. What if there had been no economic crisis to drive so many people into Hitler's arms? What if the government had dealt decisively with the NSDAP and its leaders? What would have happened if, for example, the French had not tolerated the occupation of the Rhineland and had taught a lesson to Germany, which was still militarily weak at the time? What would have happened if Hitler had been shot during the 1923 putsch? You yourself always speak of two worlds, Steiner.

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I'll concede that for the sake of argument, not because I really believe it, but because otherwise we'd have no basis for discussion. Yet when your world descends into mine, it must obey its laws there too. An
such undertaking, from zero to a hundred, so to speak, cannot be planned in advance. There are too many uncertainties that can throw a spanner in the works. That is what casts your global conspiracy theories in a bad light."

"Esoteric knowledge cannot be transferred one-to-one into political objectives. It can take many forms. The initiates of the Thule Society founded the NSDAP with its programme because, against the backdrop of the times,

. At a different time, they would have created something else. True knowledge always transcends its manifestation in the real world, for the latter is transient. Knowledge is not. That, incidentally, is what makes it so difficult for people like you to grasp the true forces of
To recognise history. They constantly change their form, yet never their essence, which, of course, remains hidden from you, Weigert.

Those who connect with these forces think in entirely different timescales. A human lifetime is but a fleeting moment of transience.

Therein lies the answer to your doubts. Had the uncertainties of which you speak come to pass, one would simply have tried a different approach – with different structures, in a different place, or at a different time. The initiated do not harbour the base desire to reap the fruits of their labour during their earthly lifetime.

Of course, you are right when you say that when descending into the real world, its laws also come into play. The men of the Thule Society made use of this. They calculated the possibilities that time afforded them. And they reacted flexibly to changes when necessary. Such men have no need for
political dogma, as they draw their calling from entirely different sources. It is only the profane who must be given constant values, so that they have something to hold on to. These people want to see the success of their efforts as early as tomorrow, a success they can grasp and comprehend. The initiate serves an idea that may only take hold of the earthly world the day after tomorrow, and if not the day after tomorrow, then in the next millennium."

Slowly, Weigert began to realise that this was the key to his story. Until now, Steiner and he had only discussed, for decades
spoken of past events. Yet Weigert had come to pick up the trail of the black sun, a sun whose deadly rays were now claiming their victims. Steiner had something to do with it; there was no doubt of that, even though he had so far spoken only of events that were long since history. If Steiner had been involved in the two assassinations

, then one more death or one less no longer mattered.

Weigert reached for his rucksack to move it closer to the bed on which he was still sitting.

In an emergency, he wanted to be able to reach the pistol as quickly as possible, for he
had no desire to become the Black Sun's next victim. Steiner paused in his efforts.

"You needn't be afraid, Mr Weigert. I have no interest in—"
To take your life, which is fleeting anyway. To make it
reverse decision, I have taken the liberty of removing your pistol from your rucksack. The only weapon of any use to you here is your mind. Use it! It is your only chance of escaping your personal mess!"

Weigert was startled.

"What do you know about it?"

"For example, that you're wanted for double murder."

Damn it! Weigert let go of the rucksack. What did Steiner have in mind for him? He obviously knew the situation he was in. And yet he told him his version of the story. Did he want to use him? Perhaps as a small piece in that obscure mosaic he was laying out before him?

"All right, Weigert."

Steiner's voice was calm again.

"No one can expect you to walk into the lion's den – at least from your point of view – without taking precautions. I wouldn't have done it any differently."

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"While we're on the subject, it seems time to bring our reflections back to the present. So let's get to the heart of the matter: if what you say is true, then there must be structures that have been maintained over the centuries, where traditions and secret knowledge are passed down. And sometimes these reach down from their world right into the very heart of real, living history."

Weigert shuddered as he suddenly realised the implications of his thoughts. There it was, the bridge he had been searching for! Excitedly, he continued.

"And if I take this thought further, then it is only logical that the haunting did not end when, in 1945, the real caricature that the Thule Society had created in this world landed on the dungheap of
." "That's right."

"However, since the Thule Society was founded specifically for this genocidal enterprise that left the whole of Europe in ruins, there was something behind it, something that existed before the Thule
and which lived on even after its demise. Something, then, that still exists today!"

“Do you still remember the men of Agarthi I told you about? Their lineage is still fertile. You ought to take legends more seriously.”

For a moment, Weigert wasn’t sure whether he was dreaming or actually experiencing all this. Steiner’s voice made him painfully aware that it was no dream.

“The men of Agarthi have lived amongst mankind for millennia. 1945 marked the end of a failed attempt to defeat the forces of Shamballa. Yet it was by no means the end of Agarthi’s ideas. We had made provisions.”

Weigert noticed that Steiner had spoken of “we” for the first time. All this time, he had spoken as though he were an outsider, a chronicler of events in which he himself had no part.

At times, Weigert had even forgotten that Steiner was, in fact, part of this occult mosaic.

“Just a few hours after my birth, I was initiated by the men of Agarthi. As I grew up, I was taught the secret knowledge they had preserved for millennia. When I was 20

When I was [age] years old, I received my final ordination in the chapel of Wewelsburg Castle. Outside, the war was already raging. The Wehrmacht was winning – for the time being. But we were preparing for the time after that. Regardless of how the battle would end, we were to go out into the world to preserve the knowledge – the knowledge that man can look the gods in the face, if only he learns to possess one himself.

There were hundreds like me in Germany. In 1942, I went to Tibet with twelve of my comrades to follow others who had been there for some time. When it became clear that the fortunes of war were no longer on the side Agarthi, many others were taken away from the Reich. By aeroplane, ship, submarine or overland. They had no difficulty in gaining a foothold in the world.

For only very few of them had a compromising past within the Nazi structures that could have been substantiated. Moreover, we all enjoyed an excellent education, enabling us to secure a suitable position in the real world as well. All who left were prepared to preserve the knowledge of Agarthis, so that in some distant hour, in another form, they might return. The Black Sun, the symbol of Agarthis, lives on. That is the truth, Weigert. And that is why you are here."

Weigert was perplexed. Yes, that was why he was here. But he was also here to save his own skin, as he faced charges of murder – murders he hadn't committed. How insignificant that seemed in the light of Steiner's account.

If Steiner was right... Weigert didn't want to believe it. Was he supposed to simply throw his entire world view overboard, just because some mad SS man was spinning him a few tales? And even if he did, what was he supposed to do then? Go home and tell the police or Hillgruber the legend of the men of Agarthi? They'd lock him up in a madhouse. Prison was still the better option.

But he wasn't done with Steiner yet.

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"Pierre Martin has discovered that you were initiated at Wewelsburg. And he has found out that you live here in Tibet. That is why you

"They killed him and his wife! Now they want to pin the blame on me! And Volker and Greenspan are the first victims of your occult rebirth, for which the Islamic People's Front is being made the scapegoat!"

Weigert had climbed out of his sleeping bag and stood up. He was now almost shouting. He loathed Steiner.

"Calm down. As for Martin and his wife, we have absolutely nothing to do with it.

Martin was an amateur historian. As you know, he was deeply interested in Wewelsburg."

Of course, in the course of his work he also came across the occult side of that era. But like so many others, he didn't take it seriously. To him, it was all nonsense. He was looking for facts, for sources he could verify in black and white. That's how he came across my name. He found me here in Tibet, and I helped him with his research into the castle, but nothing more. That was all he wanted. We used him to lay a false trail."

"Wewelsburg as a perfectly ordinary SS centre, embellished with a few of Heinrich Himmler's eccentricities that couldn't be concealed. But no clues as to what really happened there. Was that what you
wanted?"

"Yes."

"And when Martin wanted to know more, you killed him!"

"No. I'd grown fond of Martin. Something like a friendship had even developed.

He was one of the few people I met who approached that period without prejudice. Admittedly in his own way and without trying to whitewash anything, but objectively. Just as his
Science dictated. He was all right because he had character; a man of the real world who demanded respect from me too. We

examined Martin and his work back then. We knew he would never dream of revealing the true background. It seemed too abstruse to him, because it didn't fit into his world."

Weigert pondered. Then there were Volker and Greenspan. If Steiner was prepared to admit his involvement in these murders, then he was probably telling the truth about Martin. For what sense did it make to admit to two deaths and deny the third?

"What do you have to do with the attacks on Volker and Greenspan? The black sun that was branded onto their foreheads can be found on the clay bowls in which you prepare your tea!"

Steiner stood up from the wall-mounted platform where he had been crouching most of the time, took a few steps into the room and then stopped, his back turned to Weigert. What was coming next?

A magician's stage performance, designed to build the audience's anticipation before he performed his best trick?

Very slowly, almost sluggishly, the words came from Steiner's lips.

"And with the sun… awakening in the morning, surrounded by radiant splendour, …equal to the beguiling beauty of all eternity, …the triumphant smile of victory."

The poem! Now Weigert remembered the note he had found on his car a few days ago. Who had placed it there? The SS? Steiner's henchmen? The men of Agarthi? Who was acting where? Who was important, who unimportant? Where were the initiates, where the profane? What had been infiltrated, what was genuine in the real world? Or was it all just a Potemkin village? What? The real world or what Steiner had
? What was right, what was wrong, what was evil, what was good? If Steiner was telling the truth, there was no longer any up or down.

"What!?"

“The Black Sun will rise again, up from the midnight of the world to a great noon. The gods will begin to dance again, and we shall let them dance within us.”

"Very soon. In a few weeks’ time, the moment will have come. Then we shall take fate into our own hands once more. With us, the men of Agarthi, what holds true today will pass into history!"

Steiner had turned round, a sparkle in his light blue eyes. For the first time, he spoke with deep emotion; his words grew louder, his hands rose to emphasise the impact of what he had said. It lasted only a few seconds, then he had regained his composure, returned to the sober objectivity he had maintained throughout their conversation.

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“You keep talking only of Volker and Greenspan. Yet the first victim was Oleg Garakin, the Russian Minister of Economic Affairs. You know nothing of this, for the others do not want the myth of Agarthi to be revived. And that is why the Islamic People’s Front was blamed for it. But it plays not the slightest part in this. Yes, we killed the men. Not out of hatred, but out of necessity. They belonged to Shambhala. Sometimes it is Agarthi’s turn, sometimes Shambhala’s. That is history, a history you cannot comprehend.”

Garakin. In Volker’s case, they had tried to cover up the circumstances of the murder. Had they succeeded with Garakin? Weigert could still clearly recall

the circumstances of his death a few months ago. His wife had shot him out of jealousy. So they said, at least. If he ever returned, he would try to verify it. And Martin?
If Steiner admitted to three assassination attempts, one of which Weigert hadn't even heard of, then he surely had nothing to do with the Frenchman's death.

Weigert felt sick at the thought that today, here in this world, there were hundreds or even thousands of esotericists walking about, whose minds had already breathed life into a Third Reich. If this Steiner wasn't just some madman who'd turned up out of the blue, boasting of deeds he'd had absolutely nothing to do with, then... Yes, then Weigert had his story. But he would have gladly done without them now.

And then, of course, there would be the men from Shambhala. Garakin, Volker, Greenspan: they had been among Agarthi's adversaries. What had his department head, Hillgruber, told him?

That Volker and Greenspan had been Freemasons. Was the same principle behind their lodges as the one Steiner had previously explained to him using the Thule Society as an example? Schamballah. The same abstruse ideas, but in green!

Or were the moral principles of the real world right after all? Did good and evil really exist? Were Agarthi and Shambhala the embodiment of what many people believed in? If so, Shambhala must surely be the good side. Yet both had the same origin. But wasn't it the same with the Devil and God? He mustn't let himself go mad now! He needed clues in the real world – there, where he could find his bearings, and where the unreal, should it actually exist, also manifested itself.

"Does that mean a new Thule Order is on the move, seeking to outdo Shamballa and pave the way for a new empire?"

"That's exactly what it means, Weigert. And the day is within reach!"

"And why are you telling me all this?"

“Because your head is on the chopping block! Your newspaper has sacked you, and the UN secret service is hunting you for the murders of Martin and his wife. You need your story, Weigert! Urgently. Otherwise you’re done for! Now you have your story. Write, Weigert! Keep the myth of Agarthi alive!”

So that was it. Steiner wanted to take advantage of his situation. He, Hans Weigert, was supposed to add a small piece to the mosaic of Agarthi.

“And what if I don’t? What if I don’t believe your obscure stories? Or what if I take this information to the authorities
and tell them where to find you? What then?” Steiner smiled. For the

first time, there was something like superiority in it.

“You will write. Not for Agarthi’s sake, but for your own.
You must save your own skin. But even if you decide otherwise, it is entirely irrelevant. What I have told you is new to the people of the world. Yet it is by no means new to Shambhala. And as for me, I shall be gone from here before you are back in Lhasa. The day of the gathering is fast approaching.”
"Whatever you do, Weigert, you can no longer stop Agarthi!"

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Bolzano, 11 December

The three of them sat in front of the open fire in Claudia’s house. Slowly, the flames consumed the wood, which occasionally crackled. A cosy warmth spread through the room. Outside, beyond the windows, darkness had already settled over the mountains.

Weigert had arrived at Rome airport only a few hours earlier. The forged documents Claudia had procured had served their purpose. No one had doubted their authenticity.

Only Weigert had begun to doubt the reality of what he had experienced on the return flight. But then he had recalled the events of the last three weeks and had become painfully aware that none of it had been a dream.

Vienna – Wewelsburg – Bolzano – Tibet: it had been a long journey to get there, and not just in terms of kilometres. He had set off as a perfectly ordinary journalist to research a story that could have ended like so many others. But then, unexpectedly and against his will,

He stepped onto the stage from the audience. Now he was acting in a play whose beginning he did not know and of which he had no idea when or how it would end. The best actors, it is said, grow into
into a role until they eventually identify completely with it. For the duration of their engagement, they undergo a transformation that pushes their own self into the background in favour of an artificially created character. Weigert, too, had undergone a metamorphosis, with one difference: for him, there was no turning back, not even once his engagement was over. Weigert played Weigert. And the change that had taken place within him was genuine. It could not be undone.

His previous worldview had been shattered. All the fixed points it had contained had been set in motion. At first slowly, then faster and faster, until they had finally vanished. Up and down, right and left, good and evil: none of it had any meaning anymore. He had found himself in the midst of a struggle in which he knew only that all the rules he had previously known had lost their validity.

A chance glance through a hotel door; a corpse with a black sun emblazoned on its forehead; a mysterious castle whose spirit from days long past was once again haunting the world; two elderly people, cruelly murdered; two silvery discs that refused to reveal their treasure; ministers, police officers and secret service agents whose

true intentions seemed shrouded in an impenetrable veil; a man in the mountains of Tibet who moved nimbly between two worlds, and of whom no one knew which of the two he actually came from.

The one, absolute truth was dead. Any attempt to revive it, undertaken by Weigert's mind, would fail miserably. Thousands of truths vied with one another. And in this chaos, Hans Weigert first had to find his own, a new one that would have nothing more to do with the old, bygone one. His mind was still caught in the midst of this night of hopeless confusion. Weigert's heart, however, had long since set out to leave the darkness behind.

In a situation from which there was no way out, where the distance between his back and the wall could be measured in mere millimetres, there was nothing left to do but accept his fate. Not with lamentation or wailing, but with the firm resolve to embrace it fully.

Amor fati.

Villiger had picked him up from the airport. On the drive to Bolzano, they hadn't spoken much. Weigert had wanted to spare himself the trouble of telling his story twice. His friend had merely informed him that he hadn't yet managed to extract their secret from Martin's data storage devices. The code was more complicated than Villiger had feared. Now the three of them were sitting in front of the fireplace. Weigert
had told his story. Everything. Neither Claudia nor Peter had interrupted him. Now that he had finished, the discussion would begin. Weigert had already been dreading this on the plane.

Who on earth would believe this story?

“Sorry, Hans. But this all sounds more than unbelievable.” Villiger opened

as Weigert had expected.

"So apparently there’s a 91-year-old SS man living in the mountains of Tibet who still looks so good that even young girls would fall for him. Why on earth are you buying into this story, Steiner?"

Weigert’s posture straightened. Now it was a matter of convincing the others. And once more, for the last time, himself.

"Let’s put the 91-year-old SS man aside for the moment. Whether that’s true is ultimately secondary. In Tibet there is a man who calls himself Karl Steiner. Let’s stick with that name, even if we can’t prove it’s correct. This man, Steiner, knows things he really shouldn’t know. He knows that a black sun has been branded onto the foreheads of Volker and Greenspan.
If we..."

“Wait a moment!”

Villiger interrupted him.

“Of course he could have known that. All he had to do was listen to the radio and read the papers. You wrote it yourself about Volker, and with Greenspan, that symbol caused even more of a stir!”

“Right. Let’s assume he gets his newspapers regularly in the Himalayas...”

"Come on, don’t get carried away. Who’s to say Steiner was there the whole time? He might only have arrived a few hours before you."

“And how do you explain, then, that his tea cups bear the same symbol as the one on Volker’s or Greenspan’s forehead?”

"There’s surely no copyright on the symbol. That professor from the University of Vienna explained to you himself that the symbol is thousands of years old. It exists—I don’t doubt that. But why shouldn’t someone just use it to decorate their teacups
?”

“Don’t you think that would be a rather strange coincidence?”

“So what? After all, he could have painted the bowls on only after the Greenspan assassination.”

“The question remains: what’s the point of all this? Screw the clay bowls! Steiner spoke of a third murder in this series, namely that of the Russian Minister of Economic Affairs, Oleg Garakin.”

“You told me that.”

"At least you listened to me. So if we could prove that there’s something fishy about the official account of what happened, then we’d have every reason to believe Steiner."

“And how do you propose to do that? Do you want to go to Russia and say: ‘Hello, here I am. I’d like to find out the truth about the Garakin murder?’ You can forget it. You wouldn’t find out any more than what’s already been in the papers.”

“Perhaps that’s enough. Perhaps there’s some inconsistency in there that, if not actually confirming Steiner’s statements, at least makes them seem more plausible.”

Claudia had been listening attentively until now. Now she joined in the conversation.

“Keep your feet on the ground. This is too serious a matter to be arguing

about.” “We’re not arguing at all!”

Villiger poured himself another whisky.

"All right, Peter. To sum up your discussion: for the time being, we have two people to look into. The first is Oleg Garakin. As Hans mentioned earlier, he is said to have been shot by his wife out of jealousy two months ago. I agree that we should definitely
reports on the murder. That's easy to do and won't take much time. The second person is Steiner himself. If he was an SS member, then there's a good chance we'll find something on him.
Moscow opened up most of its archives a few years ago. They contain a wealth of documents from the period in question. The British have also lifted the restrictions on the files they took from Germany in 1945. We could..."

Villiger interrupted her.

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"All you can establish from that is, at best, that there was a man named Karl Steiner to whom the biographical details, as Hans has told them to us, apply.

But that is by no means proof that the man Hans met in Tibet is this Karl Steiner."

"Unfortunately, Peter is right. Investigating this matter would be quite time-consuming, and the result wouldn't get us much further in any case."

"Right, gentlemen. So let's tick Karl Steiner off the list for now. Even then, there's still a great deal of what he said left to consider. If I've understood Hans correctly, he's presented a completely new version of the history of the Third Reich. Agreed?"

Weigert nodded. Villiger couldn't resist raising an objection.

“Yes, he did, no doubt about it. But what does that actually mean? Even if we were to verify these facts

- and I stress: the facts – that doesn’t mean anything at all. If we can track these things down, then Steiner could have done so too."

Now it was Weigert’s turn to object.

"True. But you’re forgetting one thing. If these facts, as you say – and by that you surely don’t mean the esoteric trappings – are correct, then
that would already be a huge step forward. Because if a secret society like the Thule Society was significantly behind a historical development such as that of the Third Reich, then that means nothing more and nothing less than that history, at least on this one point, unfolded differently from how it is generally portrayed.”

"ToucheY*

Villiger seemed convinced, at least on this point.

"Right, let’s take this a step further. If this plan worked at least once, why shouldn’t it work a
second time? Is it really so unlikely that this very same Thule Order preserved its structures into the period following the collapse of 1945

? If these people believe in their, if I may say so, religion, why shouldn’t they have gone underground for a while? Come to think of it, it would actually be unusual if that hadn’t been the case. There are plenty of examples in history where religious groups were persecuted and passed on their faith underground. And then let’s take the next step: if these people and their successors actually managed to infiltrate positions of influence over the decades, why shouldn’t they make a fresh attempt to
?"

Villiger took a sip of whisky before replying.

“I admit that it all sounds quite plausible. But who’s to say that this Thule Order really existed? And even if it did, what influence did it have? That’s the crux of the whole matter: was it really the triggering, decisive factor, or was it merely one of numerous phenomena that contributed to the development ?”

Weigert was about to say something, but Claudia beat him to it.

"The conclusion is this: we need to verify Steiner’s statements. If they are correct, then we have only cleared the first hurdle of many. But the fact remains: a hypothesis is considered true as long as it cannot be disproved. If we can disprove Steiner’s version of the story on this point, then we can probably put the whole thing to rest.
That alone would be a help to us.” Now

it was Weigert’s turn again.

"That would already be a help. But then who killed Volker and Greenspan? And who killed Garakin, if Steiner’s statements on this point ? And who has Martin and his wife on their conscience? That’s the reason why we’re all sitting here and why I’m in deep shit! And not because the story unfolded decades ago
unfolded differently from what’s in the books.”

There was silence for a few breaths. Then Claudia broke the silence.

"Volker, Greenspan, Martin. Now I remember! I haven't even told you what I found out about it while you were away."

"Well, it’s about time!"

"Hillgruber told you that Volker, the Eurofed President, and Greenspan, the UN Security Council member, were allegedly Freemasons.

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As we'd agreed, I did a bit of research into it. The result: no new information on Volker and Greenspan. I couldn't find any confirmation of Hillgruber's claims. But something
else came to light. I did tell you about the big P-2 scandal in Italy in the early eighties.
That was the first thing that came to mind on the subject. P-2 was a secret Masonic lodge. I don't want to bore you now with the finer details of this extremely convoluted story. But one point
I don't want to keep this from you: a certain Roberto Calvi, then head of the Vatican bank, Banco Ambrosiano, was implicated in the scandal. A series of shady financial transactions can be attributed to him, in the truest sense of the word. In the spring of 1982, Calvi fled Italy. By June of that same year, he was dead."

"What's that got to do with us?"

"Now, now. Calvi was murdered, and in a most unusual manner.

He was found hanged under Blackfriars Bridge in London, his feet at a right angle, with bricks in his pockets. What was initially passed off as suicide later turned out to be what it really was: a classic ritual murder in the Masonic style. The right angle is one of their symbols, which the lodges adopted from their predecessors, the stonemasons.

And the bricks allude to the symbolism of the rough and the hewn stone. The rough stone is the spirit of the novice in the lodge, who must first

work on himself in the spirit of Masonic philosophy, and must therefore hew this stone."

Weigert could no longer hold back.

"Martin's wife! Her body has been arranged in exactly the same way!"

"Exactly, my dear."

"And that, in turn, confirms Steiner's statements in a certain way: in his legend, he spoke of two rival groups, Agarthi and Shamballa. Let us regard the legend as just that—a legend—and turn to tangible reality. Then we are dealing with two rival groups: there is one manifestation of the Agarthi group, the Thule Order. And there is
another manifestation of the Shamballa group, Freemasonry. Both are locked in a struggle against one another, a struggle that largely defies rational understanding, a struggle that plays out rather on an esoteric-religious level. And sometimes we find signs of this struggle in the world we can perceive. There is..."

Peter Villiger spoke up again; for him, the ample enjoyment of malt whisky alone was not enough.

"I really don't know what's got into you, Hans. You're making a big deal out of it. But Steiner himself told you about it, about Shambhala and the Freemasons. So what proof are the details of the murder of Martin's wife supposed to be?"

"Wait a moment! Steiner did speak of the Shamballa and the Freemasons. That is correct. And he also said that they were responsible for the deaths of Martin and his wife. However, our conversation did not touch on how I found Martin's wife. So if Steiner establishes a causal link between her murder and certain Masonic lodges, and if this link is now corroborated by our – that is, Claudia's – research, then that means Steiner's statements are, in a sense, confirmed
."

Villiger did not give up so easily.

"Wrong! Just as with the symbol of the black sun, he could also have learnt about the details of the murders of Martin and, above all, his wife from the newspaper!"

Weigert countered:

“He may well have. But that doesn’t change the fact that he gave us a lead, which has been substantiated by Claudia’s research. And this lead points towards some kind of lodges! And after all, Volker and Greenspan, if one is to believe at least HiUgraber and our New York correspondent, were members of Masonic lodges!”

Villiger muttered to himself. Claudia spoke up.

"We could sit here for hours and keep discussing this. But that won’t change the fact that we have to do something. You, Peter, still haven’t managed to decode Martin’s two CDs.
Who..."

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"That’s enough now! I’ve been sitting in front of the screen for a whole week! I simply can’t do any more! If you’re not happy with anything, I can always go back to my cabin!"

Now the time had come to mediate. Villiger wasn’t really convinced by the way the story was unfolding. Besides, he was helping mainly out of friendship. You couldn’t expect him to identify one hundred per cent with the

story. If they came down too hard on him now, he'd walk out. Weigert stepped in.

"It's all right. I'm sure you've done your best. You'll manage in the end. The stuff on those CDs must be important, otherwise
Martin wouldn't have encrypted it and hidden it in a flowerpot. If he were just an insignificant minor figure, they wouldn't have killed him either. You're our hope, old boy! You must carry on, please!"

Claudia realised that her choice of words hadn't exactly been diplomatic.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I just wanted to say that you simply have to carry on."

She placed her hand on Villiger's shoulder.

"So you've managed to persuade me again. All right, I'll go back up to my little room and carry on playing. But if I haven't managed it in a week, I'm out."

Villiger stood up and made his way upstairs to the room where the computer was.

"Peter has his work. You, Hans, will have plenty to do now too. Tomorrow I'll start by looking into the Garakin murder.

And then I'll drive to Munich to dig through some dusty files and find out what I can about this Thule Order. You'll analyse the material. Steiner told you that the day of the gathering, as he called it, is fast approaching. Whatever he meant by that, if it's true, then we've only got a little time left."

96

Vienna, 12 December

“Good evening, Mr Kipling!”

Joe Kipling rose from his armchair to shake Hans-Jörg Schneider’s hand. At the same time, he looked around. None of the restaurant’s guests seemed to take any notice of the men.

“Good evening. Let’s stick to German. If the
"If things carry on like this, I fear I’ll need this language even more often than English."

The portly lawyer gestured to the slender bank manager to take a seat.

“The shares aren’t looking good for us, are they?”

Schneider placed his napkin on his lap.

“If that was meant to be a question, I was actually going to ask you the same thing. Perhaps you have some good news for me.”

As he said this, Kipling took a cigarette from the packet. Now he lit it.

“I’m sorry. The UN Secret Service is investigating at full speed. But no matter what they try, all leads come to nothing. As far as possible, the World Intelligence Service has in Tibet all
Have the deaths during the period in question checked. Naturally, there was no Karl Steiner among them. But you know that doesn’t mean anything. He may have lived there under a different name, or he may have died in some godforsaken wasteland without the authorities being notified.

That’s the norm there, not the exception. And last but not least, Martin might well have been lying.”

Kipling looked at Schneider thoughtfully.

“The Frenchman wasn’t lying, at least not as far as Steiner is concerned. As you know, we have our records. There was indeed a Karl Steiner in the SS who took part in the Third Reich’s final Tibet expedition in 1942. Immediately after the war, attempts were made to track these men down. We managed to find a few dozen of them. But a total of twelve slipped through our fingers. Most of them are likely to have passed away by now. But before that, they will have passed on their knowledge to others whom we do not know. No, no, the matter concerning Steiner is correct.”

Schneider had beckoned the waiter over. The two men placed their orders. Once the waiter had left, the bank manager leaned forward.

“Tell me, Mr Kipling, what’s the real story with these people from Agarthi? They’re shooting some of our most important brothers down like dogs. But what else are they up to? I can’t see any signs anywhere that anything like what happened in the 1920s is repeating itself.”

Kipling took a sip of wine and lit his next cigarette. Schneider was one of the most important brothers in Europe. Yet within the strictly hierarchical order, there was a whole host of people ranked above him. All of them, whether at the top or bottom of the ladder with its 33 rungs, had sworn to keep silent upon their initiation. Outwardly, of course, but also towards those who stood below them in the hierarchy of power. Only someone who had was worthy of being initiated into the deepest secrets. And what was known at the top about Agarthi was not to filter down. Even Kipling did not know everything. But he was aware that he himself was not allowed to pass on even that little bit to Schneider. Not yet. If they needed the bank manager’s help and his contacts, they would tell him what was necessary.

Just as the portly lawyer was about to give an evasive answer, a man approached the table.

“Good evening, gentlemen.”

Then he turned to Schneider.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Could I have a quick word with you in private? It's important."

"You're welcome to join us." Schneider

gestured towards Kipling.

"Mr Kipling is welcome to hear what you have to say to me.

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He's one of us. May I introduce: Joe Kipling from San Francisco, Mr Olaf Carlsson from the UN Secret Service in Vienna."

Carlsson bowed slightly as he shook the lawyer's hand. He sat down.

"Please, Mr Carlsson, what is this about?"

"It concerns the journalist who, well… is implicated in that double murder in Germany. My men have tracked him down."

"Where is he staying?"

"In Bolzano. He's staying with an old university friend there. Strictly speaking, in her parents' house."

Carlsson's expression suggested he was expecting praise. Schneider ignored it.

“I do hope you’ll keep him under surveillance? At least this time, he shouldn’t get away from you.”

“Of course. You did want me to get in touch with you once we’d found Weigert. Shall I have him arrested now?”

“Of course. We…”

Kipling interrupted Schneider and turned to Carlsson.

“Wait a moment. I’ll be able to tell you more in a few minutes. Please excuse me for a moment.”

The lawyer stood up and walked away without further comment. Carlsson watched him go, looking puzzled. Schneider felt it was time to offer an explanation.

"It’s all right. Please do regard Mr Kipling’s request as a brotherly favour. He just sometimes lacks a feel for the
right way to put things.”

Kipling squeezed his bulky frame into the telephone booth situated near the toilets. He preferred the booth to the
cordless phone that a waiter could have brought to his table. This way he was undisturbed. He dialled Beckett’s number. Seconds later, Beckett’s face appeared on the screen.

“Hello, Thomas. I have some news.”

Beckett looked exhausted. His eyes were bloodshot. He hadn’t shaved yet, even though it was well past midday in San Francisco.

“Go on, Joe.”

“UN Intelligence has tracked down that Austrian journalist.”

“Has he been arrested yet?”

“No.”

"Then have him taken down as planned. Arrest, indictment, conviction. You know what we agreed."

"I know. But I no longer think that’s the best idea."

"Do you have a better suggestion, then?"

"Perhaps. If we have Weigert arrested for murder and he ends up in court, it’ll cause quite a stir. After all, he was a journalist. So some of his colleagues will take an interest in his fate, at least in the media. In court, Weigert would certainly stir up the whole Volker affair again. Admittedly, since the attack on Greenspan – where we couldn’t cover anything up
and the Islamic People’s Front’s claim of responsibility for the attacks, which we orchestrated, it’s no longer all that significant, but still. And who knows what else Weigert has discovered about Wewelsburg in the meantime. He’ll fight like a lion before the judge, because he’s innocent, after all. And his statements are sure to generate some resonance. Here in Europe, we’ve made virtually no progress. We don’t need another front right now.”

"I’m waiting for your suggestion, Joe."

"Let’s buy Weigert off. Let’s offer him to drop the investigation and return to his newspaper. He’s trapped anyway. As soon as he stops toeing the line, the Wewelsburg murders will simply be reopened. And he’ll end up in court after all. But if he cooperates, he can be of use to us. At the very least, he’ll keep quiet and dutifully write whatever we want. After all, Weigert wouldn’t be the first person we’ve taken out of circulation in this way.

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And even some of our most die-hard opponents have eventually realised that resistance is futile and joined us. Who can resist the temptations of influential friends, power and money? Who knows, perhaps he could also lead us onto a trail to Thule?"

"Fine by me, Joe. Do whatever you think is right. Weigert is only our smallest problem.

The Council will finally convene the day after tomorrow. Then we'll decide what to do. I assume I'll be tasked with flying to Europe to coordinate matters over there with you."

"Let me know if you find out anything more." "I'll be

in touch, Joe."

99

Vienna, 13 December

Bergmann wasn't exactly in the best of moods today. As soon as he got up, his wife had bombarded him with her holiday wishes. She wanted to go to the Maldives to escape Vienna's harsh winter. Sun, sand, doing nothing. And all of it as soon as possible. But he didn't have time for that now. He couldn't go away when there were matters unfolding that needed his attention. Yet the editor-in-chief of the *Blatt* hadn't dared to give her a clear "no"

. He had wanted to spare himself the ensuing row, at least for the time being. He wouldn't have been able to get his way anyway. So he played for time.

Dr Karl Bergmann entered the anteroom to his office at exactly 10.27
27. Even out in the corridor, he had noticed the delightful aroma of fresh coffee, a clear sign that his secretary was already there.

"Good morning, Doctor!"

Annette Runge's voice sounded as though her evening yesterday – and possibly her night as well – had been most pleasant. Her floral, low-cut dress matched her cheerful mood.
Normally, Bergmann would have joked with "Miss Annette", as he usually called her, at this point. But today he really wasn't in the mood for it. His wife had been too nerve-wracking. He merely grumbled an indistinct "Morning" and set off towards his office. But his secretary clearly had something else to say.

"Mr Schneider is already waiting for you in there. I took the liberty of asking him to come into your office in the meantime."

She set the bottle of pink nail varnish aside and reached for a note that appeared from underneath.

"Director Schneider is accompanied by a gentleman from the United Nations…" She glanced at the note.

"A Mr Olaf Carlsson."

First his wife, and now this as well! What did Schneider want now? And why had he brought Carlsson along?

"Thank you, my dear. Would you please bring us some coffee?"

"Coming straight away, Doctor."

Bergmann opened the door to his office and stepped inside. Schneider and Carlsson, who had taken a seat on the worn sofa, stood up.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Please, do stay seated.” Schneider held out

his hand to Bergmann.

“Good morning, Doctor. I hope you’ll forgive our unannounced visit. I think you know Mr Carlsson.”

It was more of a statement than a question, and rightly so, for Bergmann had already met the UN intelligence officer several times at receptions. And once, it must have been last year during that hot
It must have been in the summer when he had bumped into Carlsson at the UN City in Vienna, in that room which was off-limits to ordinary mortals. Only the brothers were allowed to enter it to carry out their work, as they called it. No one but them knew the true purpose of this outwardly unassuming refuge.

“Yes, we know each other. Good morning.”

He shook Carlsson’s hand too. All three sat down. “How

can I help you, gentlemen?”

And there it was again, that nervousness a schoolboy feels towards his teacher, that anxiety about whether one had done one’s homework properly.

Schneider, the bank manager, leaned back relaxed, just like a poker player who knows he has the better hand.

“I’m truly terribly sorry to have to bother you again with this matter.

But there have been some new developments in the Hans Weigert case.”

Weigert again! Bergmann cursed his former subordinate under his breath. And they always had to come to him with this sort of thing. The editor-in-chief didn't get a chance to ask any further questions. There was a knock at the door.

100

"Come in!"

The secretary entered, carrying a large tray to serve the coffee. The three men remained silent as they helped themselves to sugar and milk and stirred their drinks. Once Miss Annette had closed the door behind her, Schneider spoke up.

"You're no doubt wondering what these new developments are. And I can tell you, on the whole, it's good news for the *Blatt*."

Schneider's voice had that saccharine tone that Arab traders in the souk exuded when they wanted to foist something on a tourist.
Bergmann couldn't imagine what news involving Hans Weigert could possibly deserve the label 'good'. But after all, he was sitting opposite Hans-Jörg Schneider. And so he refrained from saying so. The banker didn't give him time to do so anyway.

"Mr Carlsson and his team were successful. They've tracked down Weigert."

Bergmann nearly choked on his coffee. That too! He could already picture it: arrest, trial, scandal. And in that scandal
, the name of the 'Blatt' would also come up, probably far too often. He

preferred it if Weigert had remained missing forever.

“Judging by your reaction, I gather you’re not exactly thrilled by this news. I can understand that. In your position, I’d be just as concerned for my company’s reputation if one of my employees were implicated in a murder trial. But I did promise you some good news. As it stands—and Mr Carlsson can confirm this—the suspicion against your journalist has evaporated.”

Slowly, it was becoming too much for Bergmann. Did they take him for a complete
idiot? He had never seriously believed that Weigert had actually committed the two murders in Wewelsburg. The bricks in Martin’s wife’s pockets, mentioned in the police report, had been proof enough for him. No, these murders were the work of his brothers.

He felt dizzy just thinking about it. Of course, humanity and tolerance sometimes had to defend themselves using such methods. But that he, of all people, should be implicated in this... Bergmann felt alternately hot and cold. What was Schneider up to now? The answer came immediately.

“Now that the suspicion against Hans Weigert has been dispelled, I believe it would be in everyone’s interest if he could return to the *Blatt*. Or am I perhaps mistaken in this?”

The sharpness Schneider’s voice had now taken on, as well as his gaze, made it clear that he had issued an order that brooked no contradiction. In his nervousness, Bergmann had apparently overlooked this.

“You can’t expect me to reinstate Weigert, can you? I mean...”

The banker cut him off brusquely.

“With all due respect, Doctor. But I believe there are interests that take precedence over yours. You know that too, don’t you?”

Schneider leaned forward and fixed the editor-in-chief with his gaze. Only now did Bergmann realise just how serious his counterpart was. But what was the reason for this? If only they would tell him the reasons behind some of the decisions made at the top! All he wanted was for them not to treat him like this. After all, he was the editor-in-chief of *The Blatt*!

“Why… I mean, why has the situation changed?”

“I’ve already told you: the suspicion against Weigert can no longer be upheld.”

Schneider didn’t want to say any more. That much was clear now. And if the banker was being so vehement, then he was surely confident of backing. Bergmann had no choice but to give in. He couldn’t afford a conflict with Schneider, not even if he’d really wanted to.

"So I’m actually supposed to rehire Weigert?" "Exactly."

101

“Haven’t the UN people made contact with him yet?”

Bergmann looked at Carlsson, who had remained silent the whole time. But Schneider gave the answer.

“That is the main point we wish to ask of you. We know where he is. And we would like you to make your offer to him. First, however, Mr Carlsson will have a few words with Weigert.”

Bergmann sighed. He couldn’t back out now. “All

right. Do you have the number?”

Only now did Olaf Carlsson speak up.

“Yes.”

He stood up and reached for the telephone on Bergmann’s desk. “May

I?”

“Of course.”

Carlsson dialled the number. A few seconds later, Claudia Apollonio’s face appeared on the screen.

“Hello.”

“Good afternoon, Ms Apollonio.”

“To whom do I have the pleasure?”

“My name is Olaf Carlsson from the World Intelligence Service.”

Claudia was visibly startled.

“We know that the Viennese journalist Hans Weigert is staying with you. I’d like to speak to him. And please tell him that some of my men are watching the house. So there’s no point in him trying to make a break for it now.”

“I’m sorry. You must be mistaken. I...”

On the screen, Claudia Apollonio could be seen being pushed aside. She protested.

Then Hans Weigert was there. His face showed that all the hopes of the last few days had just vanished.

"Here I am. We spotted your men half an hour ago. I always thought you were more professional than that."

"We do. The men have been here since yesterday evening. Let’s cut to the chase, Mr Weigert.

We have an offer to make you which, I believe, is extremely fair. If you wish, we’ll refrain from arresting you. Not only that, but you could also start working at the ‘Blatt’ again, cleared of any suspicion of murder.”

“How kind of you. But you know just as well as I do that I have absolutely nothing to do with the deaths of Martin and his wife.
Apart from that, what’s the price for your humanity? Or is the whole thing free of charge?”

"Pretty much. But, to be honest, we wouldn’t be too keen on you continuing your investigations into Volker, Greenspan and everything
related to it."

“What makes you so sure I’ll accept your offer?”

"If you turned it down, you’d be arrested a minute later. And your girlfriend along with you!"

“So you’re trying to blackmail me?”

“A nasty word. I want to do a fair deal with you.”

“And how can you guarantee that my newspaper will take me back?”

“Your boss will be happy to do so. Wait a moment.” Carlsson

handed over to Bergmann.

"Good afternoon, Mr Weigert. I’m truly sorry that things have turned out so badly for you. But I can assure you that now the suspicion against you has been cleared, you can of course come back to work with us. After all, I had no choice but to dismiss you. You were, after all, under suspicion of murder. But now that it’s all over..."

"I suppose Carlsson discussed the gag order for me with you?"

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“I beg your pardon, Mr Carlsson is an employee of the United Nations. He’s not in a position to dictate to the ‘Blatt’. But you will surely appreciate that it wouldn’t be very wise for you, of all people, to return to the topics that caused you so many difficulties.”

Carlsson took over again.

“Well, you’ve heard him. Are you in or out?”

“This has all come rather suddenly. I’d like to think it over again.”

“I don’t see what there is left to think about. I suppose I’ll have to explain your situation to you once more, so that...”

Schneider handed Carlsson a note, making sure Weigert couldn’t see it on his screen.

“What is it, Carlsson?”

“Right. You’ll have your time to think it

over.” “A week!”

“You’re mad!”

The banker made a few gestures. Carlsson was puzzled, but Schneider was in charge.

“Right. A week. Starting now. But there’s one thing you need to be clear about: My men are standing outside your door. If you try to make a run for it, we’ll catch you. You don’t stand a chance!”

“Good to know. What about Claudia Apollonio if I go ahead?” “What’s

to be done with her? We’ll leave her alone.”

“Where can I reach you?”

Carlsson gave him three phone numbers: his office number, his mobile number and his home number.

“You’ll hear from me within a week at the latest.”

“Think it over carefully, Mr Weigert. And always remember: we’re keeping an eye on you.”

103

Bolzano, 13 December

Weigert turned round and looked at Claudia and Peter, who had been listening in on the conversation.

“Shit!” Villiger

nodded.

“I told you so. So there really are cops in that car out there.”

“And I bet those two men aren’t the only ones they’ve sent. What now?”

"Could you make some coffee, Claudia?"

“Sure. If you can think of anything better to do. Come on, let’s sit in the kitchen.”

Whilst Weigert settled down on the bench of the dining set, Claudia fiddled with the espresso machine. Villiger crouched on a
sideboard, from where he could see everything. Nobody really knew what to say. What had been mere speculation half an hour ago, when they’d spotted the car outside the house, was now a certainty. Weigert had been discovered. And a knife had been held to his throat. There was still a final reprieve, but then...

“Do you actually know this Carlsson, Hans?”

“Yes, at least by name. I once wrote a story about the UN secret service in Vienna. Back then, Carlsson
didn’t receive me, mind you, but just sent his press officer. I’ve never met him in person. He’s quite a big shot. As far as I can remember, the second-in-command at the Vienna headquarters. When you consider that Vienna is one of the three main bases of the World Intelligence Service across Europe, that’s not bad. But whether important or not, something’s fishy with the UN lot. First, they try to uncover the details of the assassination attempt on To cover up for Volker, they want to pin two murders on me that I had nothing to do with. And now that they’ve found me, they’re
calling off the chase and, in return, want to put a muzzle on me.”

Claudia had finished preparing the espresso and sat down next to Weigert on the kitchen bench.

“The arrest warrant for you wasn’t issued by the UN secret service, but by the Eurocops, as you told us. But now that the UN lot have stuck their noses into the Volker affair, it’s only logical that they’re also looking into the murders of Martin and his wife
. And that’s because the journalist who’d already interfered with them in the Volker case turned up there.”

Weigert was slowly getting annoyed.

“Are we going to have to go through the whole thing again now?”

“No, that was just the introduction. What I’m getting at are the statements Steiner made to you in Tibet. Oh, Peter, could you please sort out the coffee?”

Villiger jumped down from the sideboard and placed three cups on the table, along with milk and sugar. Then he brought over the pot of steaming black brew.

“I could really do with that right now. After all, I’ve only had three hours’ sleep.”

“Don’t keep interrupting her. Right, Claudia, carry on.”

“Steiner told you the legend of Agarthi—that is, the Thule Society—and Shambhala—that is, the Freemasons. Volker and Greenspan, as well as Garakin, if you believe Steiner, were men of Shambhala. This statement is also backed up by the tip from your department head, according to which Volker and Greenspan are said to have been lodge members.”

“We’ve already discussed all that!”

“Wait and see. If Steiner is being so open with you and admits that the two assassinations you knew about were carried out by his people, and even admits that there was a third assassination attempt beforehand, then he clearly has no interest in keeping anything secret in this regard.”

"What do you mean, 'keep it secret'? He practically urged me to write about it!"

"Exactly. Besides, Steiner and his people have hardly anything to do with the murders at Wewelsburg.

Otherwise, he could easily have admitted to those as well.”

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“That’s what I’ve always said!”

"Don’t get impatient now. So Shambhala is the side that doesn’t want anything about Agarthi to become known. If the UN secret service is helping with this, then we can assume that Shambhala maintains excellent contacts with them. There are probably even

some people from this group in relevant positions. Perhaps Carlsson is one of them too."

"And?"

"Let me spin this thought out a bit further. Let's assume that the UN secret service isn't a bunch of amateurs. After all, there's been no shortage of evidence of its efficiency in the past. The
would mean that they know full well that you did not commit the murders in Wewelsburg. So if there are links between the secret service and the Shamballa, and if the Shamballa has no interest in anyone digging into the matter, then it is only natural that they would want to silence you. So they pin the
murders on you."

"But you've just heard it yourself. There's obviously no interest in that anymore. Carlsson's offer was to let me off scot-free."

"Yes, but the price is the same: you're to keep your hands off the whole affair. If they let you return to the *Blatt*, then they've gained something. A trial against you would only stir things up again, and that's exactly what they want to avoid."

"I don't like that."

Villiger slammed his coffee cup down on the table.

"Ever since the Greenspan assassination at the latest—which, after all, took place in broad daylight and where all the media consequently reported on the mark that had been branded onto his forehead—a whole horde of journalists has been investigating this matter. So why should Hans, of all people, be so important to the Shamba Allah?"

"It's quite simple. Hans is the only one who, even if only by chance, has found a clue leading to Agarthi."

"Nonsense! The others don't know that Hans was in Tibet and spoke to Steiner there."

"Obviously not. Otherwise, the UN secret service would have arrested him long ago. But they know he was at Wewelsburg and spoke to Martin there. And so they know he's on the right track. What they don't know, however, is how far we've already got.

That's exactly what they think they can prevent by trying to buy Hans off."

"Why do you assume I'd just go along with it without a second thought?"

"Is that so illogical? You're just a normal journalist, not an agent. How would you carry on living if you were wanted by the authorities? You'd have no chance of staying in hiding for long. We realised that ourselves, of course. After all, we just wanted to buy enough time to get something in hand before they arrested you. The price of not accepting their offer would be a life on the run. Who would accept that, especially when you know you're innocent? I think the
UN people are calculating very correctly. Their only mistake is that they don't reckon with the fact that we've already found out a great deal, more than they'd ever dared to dream. But who could possibly
coincidences, like the ones that happened to you with Martin?"

"That's true. If I'd arrived just ten minutes later, he'd already have been dead. And we'd still be sitting here today, without the faintest idea of what's really going on."

"So far, so bad. But why are they giving you a whole week to think it over? A few hours or a day would surely have been enough."

"Villiger really was a critical thinker."

"No idea. But it can't matter to them. They've got us under control. Since we're amateurs and they're professionals, we can't get out of it anyway. There's not much we can do about it either.

"Whether they've got me ready by tomorrow or in a week's time makes no difference."

Claudia didn't seem to have finished what she was saying.

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"You, Hans, and I, we're both journalists. And you, Peter, as a former PR man, know enough about the profession. What we wanted was nothing more than a hot story. Right?"

Weigert nodded slowly.

"Well, yes."

"Have you actually realised yet that this has hardly anything to do with that anymore? I..."

Weigert interrupted her.

"Silly question. As soon as you come across fresh corpses and they try to hold you responsible, it's obviously got nothing to do with journalism!"

"That too, Hans. But something is happening all around us that – if you take it seriously – could be of extremely great importance to the world."

"What does it mean to take it seriously? Garakin, Volker and Greenspan were, in fact, murdered. All three were extremely prominent figures. Is there anything else that one
?"

"You're right. But doesn't it make a difference whether this is ordinary terrorism, as we're used to, so to speak, or

events whose significance extends far beyond the elimination of these individuals?"

Villiger was not particularly pleased with Claudia's remarks. "So now

you believe in Steiner's conspiracy theories too?" "Believe it or not, in

any case it is only logical that politics and
history are made in this way too. It
It would only be a conspiracy theory if I wanted to attribute everything and anything to the workings of some shadowy forces. But not even Steiner has claimed that Agartha and Shambhala need take no account of political action as we have known it so far. They simply make use of it and try to exploit it in accordance with their own goals."

"But what I was getting at is that it's not really about the story we're chasing anymore. We're now part of the story ourselves. And we could influence how it turns out."

Hans understood only too well what she meant. After all, Claudia was a journalist too.

Like him, she had always been aware that they were merely reporting on the actions of others.

Now, for the first time, they had a foothold in something that might allow them to influence the course of events themselves. But how on earth?

Villiger's criticism was not long in coming.

"I think you're looking at this a bit too naively. Let's suppose we were to start trumpeting everything we know through the media right now. SS men holed up in the Himalayas, esoteric secret societies locked in a battle for world domination, all peppered with a few political assassinations. That's the stuff science fiction, but not the basis for credible

reporting. People would think we were mad. No one would believe it. On top of that, we have virtually no concrete
. At best, we could point to a few logical connections. No, that won't do."

Claudia wasn't about to back down.

"Maybe we do have the evidence! And it's on these CDs that you can't crack!"

"Here we go again. I..." Weigert interrupted.

"Stop it! Peter's right. As long as we can't actually prove anything, there's no point in publishing anything, even if there were a media outlet willing to do so. The only takers for our current information would be the police or the secret services. And even there, I don't see it working out. The official focus of the whole affair is the attacks on Volker and Greenspan. In terms of jurisdiction, therefore, it is primarily a case for the World Intelligence Service, even if other agencies are assisting them. It hardly matters where we take our information.

Ultimately, everything would end up with the UN intelligence service anyway. And that's where the people from Shambhala are based. Offering our knowledge to states that aren't on good terms with the UN is surely of no political
interest here, is it?"

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Villiger shook his head.

“No, of course not. But who’s actually telling you that Schamballah—that is, the Freemasons—would be a bad port of call for us? I mean, if the alternative is the Thule Society, which is said to have brought about a Third Reich—allegedly, at least—then why not go to the people who are at the helm today?”

“You’re making progress. If one believes Steiner – and you do, by presenting such a choice – then both are cut from the same cloth. I don’t yet dare to pass a final judgement on the matter. But after everything that has happened so far, I’m not sure whether Schamballah is actually a good alternative, or perhaps just the lesser of two evils at best.”

"Listen, you two heroes. I've just thought of something else entirely." "Don't

you start on the CDs again!"

"No, don’t worry. But it’s still got something to do with you, Peter. Have you actually noticed that Carlsson only mentioned Hans and me?"

“That’s true. So what?”

“That means the UN secret service might not even know Peter is here. He hasn’t left the house the whole time and has been holed up in the room upstairs behind the screen. And because he’s such a night owl, he’s always kept the curtains drawn.”

Weigert jumped up.

“Of course! If they really only discovered me here yesterday, that means they’ve probably only been tapping Claudia’s phones since yesterday. So they couldn’t have known anything about the conversation with you, Peter, in Norway. Nor about your arrival here. We...”

Claudia was unstoppable.

“That means we can still act despite the surveillance, at least for the one-week reprieve!”

“As someone directly involved, may I say something about

this?” “Please.”

"If that’s supposed to mean I should sneak out of the house to continue the investigation, you’ve got it all wrong. Firstly: if anyone can decrypt those bloody CDs, it’s me – I’m the only one of the three of us who can do it. Since they’re still our most important lead, we can’t do without them. Secondly: You’ve perhaps forgotten that I didn’t go to Norway to be dragged back from there and got mixed up in some dodgy business. I want to help you, sure. But I’ve no desire to end up in a cell myself. And then there’s a third point: Hans has a week to announce his decision. Who’s to say the UN lot will stay out in their cars during that time? Maybe they’ll get cold and
they’ll fancy a tipple. Or they might just turn the place upside down. Then it’s game over for Villiger’s free pass. Got it?”

Weigert wanted to say something, but Claudia beat him to it.

“Unfortunately, you’re right about the first point. I’ll gladly take note of the second. That’s all Hans asked of you anyway. But as for the third, we can at least take some precautions and not make it too easy for them.”

Villiger sighed. But Claudia wouldn’t be deterred.

“Now that they’ve discovered us, I can no longer go to Munich as planned. As soon as I start digging around in any archives there looking into the Thule Society, our friends from the UN secret service won’t waste any time. Then things will get too hot for them. Whichever way you look at it, you’re our trump card now, Peter.”

107

> San Diego, 14 December

The sun was just about to bring the day to a close and slowly sink below the horizon. But first, it had decided, there should be one more of its unforgettable farewell displays.

And so it sent out its rays one last time before disappearing, causing the clouds and sky on the western horizon to glow in vivid colours. It was as though it wished to bear visible witness to its mysterious power, to tell mankind: ‘I shall return, and nothing can prevent me. “For billions of years, she had been one of the constants of the divine order. She would remain so, no matter what happened down here on Earth.

The seven men who had gathered at Thomas Beckett’s country estate were not in the right frame of mind to enjoy this spectacle at that moment. It was probably because they had come to discuss matters of the utmost seriousness. Yet the thought had occurred to some of them that they were here precisely because of this sun, which was stretching its black rays out towards them from Agarthi.

Whenever the circle of seven gathered – the Council, as they called it – they always set aside everything that the thousands upon thousands,
who stood on the lower rungs of the ladder, was imposed upon them in their "work". They no longer needed symbols as a means of connecting with the divine.

For, like Karl Steiner, they had long since become wanderers between two worlds. They tried, with great success, to keep the reins of one world in their hands. Yet their true goal lay in the other.

There had always been seven men who made up the Council. If one of them died, his chosen successor was also initiated into the final secrets of Shamballa.

For four years, the Circle of Seven had been composed as it was now gathered at Beckett's country estate.

At 38, Lutz Wettler was the youngest in the group. He was German, but in times like these his nationality meant little, and in circles like these it meant nothing at all. Wettler had an astonishing career behind him, the most recent stage of which had been the post of Minister for Agriculture in the European Political Union. Admittedly, the Brotherhood had helped him on his rise, but he owed at least as much to his intelligence and diligence.

Lim Glenn came from New York. He was the embodiment of the American dream. He had fought his way up from the very bottom to the very top. Glenn had started out at the age of 18 as an unknown journalist for a tabloid in the Big Apple. Now, 45 years later, he was one of the most powerful media moguls in the world. He presided over a global empire of television and radio stations, newspapers and magazines, satellites and news agencies. And he knew how to use his position to his advantage.

Professor Robert Scott was a picture-perfect Brit: pale skin, red hair and an equally red, flowing full beard. Add to that the demeanour of a true gentleman, further emphasised by a slightly nasal voice. His domain was economics. Ever since he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics ten years ago, he had been a highly sought-after adviser to numerous governments and international institutions. The British magazine *The Economist* had once described him as "the éminence grise of global economic policy".

General Jean-Paul Pascal was cut from a completely different cloth. He came from a Parisian family in which almost all the male members had dedicated themselves to the army of the Grande Nation for generations. Pascal was a soldier through and through, though that was not to say he lacked an understanding of political dynamics. When France, which had withdrawn from NATO in 1966, had fully re-entered the

defence structures of the European Union, he had shortly afterwards taken command of the first units of the European
Army. From there, Pascal had been recruited by the United Nations, where he now served as Deputy Military Commander of the UN Army.

Hiroshi Fukanaga had arrived here from Tokyo. But he might just as easily have come from any other part of the globe.

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For in order to efficiently manage the global conglomerate he headed – a company whose payroll totalled almost 650,000 names – he had three wide-body jets at his disposal, all of which served not only as a means of transport but also as living, working and sleeping quarters. Fukanaga's corporate conglomerate consisted of several hundred interlinked companies, the largest of which were primarily active in the electronics sector. Less well known, however, was the fact that the giant multinational held 70 per cent of the world's patents in the field of genetic engineering.

The sixth member of the group was the Russian career diplomat Sergei Kamenev. Kamenev had fully supported the process of restructuring the Soviet Union and opening up to the West, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Following the coup of 1991, several key posts had been up for filling in the then-new Russian Foreign Ministry.
Kamenev seized the opportunity. A few years later, he was elected to the United Nations Security Council. The series of murders in recent weeks had particularly affected him. Both Oleg Garakin, whom he had known since his early youth, and his colleague on the Security Council, Alan Greenspan, had been his friends.

Thomas Beckett was number seven. As primus inter pares, he was the one who held the reins, but necessary decisions were made collectively. And today, with the sun gone and night reigning, important decisions had to be made.

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> Bolzano, 15 December

Peter Villiger didn't look well. His eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't combed his long hair for days, nor had he changed the T-shirt he was wearing. He was just stubbing out a cigarette, only to light the next one immediately afterwards. The ashtray next to the computer was already so full that a few cigarette ends were threatening to fall out. Right next to it stood a bottle of whisky, which only the day before yesterday had presented itself in pristine, unblemished condition. Today, the level had dropped so far that one could already
dry patch at the bottom of the bottle. The glass standing in front of it was the sort one would have returned to the waiter even in a third-rate pub. All that remained was the hope that alcohol really did disinfect.

Villiger had already been sitting in front of the screen for eleven days and nights, interrupted only by a few hours' sleep each night and the occasional brief conversation among the three of them. He had even moved most of his meals here to the desk. Yesterday, after 14 hours of uninterrupted work at the computer, the columns of numbers and letters had suddenly begun to move. At first he'd thought there was something wrong with the screen. But then, when he'd rubbed his closed eyes with his hand, it had stopped. He'd simply been exhausted. Ten minutes later he'd fallen asleep in his armchair, his right hand still

clutching the mouse. Claudia had found him like that in the morning and looked extremely worried.

What had started as a favour to a friend was turning more and more into a nightmare for Villiger.

Sure, he too was interested to see how the whole affair would turn out in the end. But slowly, the whole thing was starting to get on his nerves. He'd wanted to start a new life in Norway. Now he'd been sitting in front of a screen for days, trying to coax supposed secrets out of two silver discs that might not even contain them. And on top of all that, he was running the risk of being swept up in the maelstrom of events and

perhaps, one day not too far off, be taken away by the UN secret service along with his friend Hans and Claudia. Being a friend really wasn't easy at times.

For the thousandth time, he moved the mouse back and forth, tapping his fingers on the keyboard every now and then to tell the machine's inner workings what to do. The data that Pierre Martin had once recorded on the two CDs had so far defied all attempts to reveal its secrets. Now it was time for the next attempt.

As always, before Villiger, after lengthy preparatory work, gave the final command to the computer that was supposed to cause it to,
To set the complex calculations in motion, he took a sip of whisky. The moment he put the glass down, he pressed the button and closed his eyes. His experience over the last few days had taught him that the machine took about two to three seconds to perform the calculations before the result appeared on the screen.

It wasn't long, but it was enough time to give his strained eyes a brief moment's rest.

Villiger opened them again, looked at the screen, closed them again, then opened them once more. He let out a loud scream and jumped to his feet. As he did so

the whisky bottle toppled over with a clatter, rolled across the table and finally crashed onto the floor, though without breaking. His screaming only stopped when Hans Weigert and Claudia Apollonio burst into the room. Weigert was rather indignant.

“What’s got into you? Have you completely lost your mind! The UN secret service are out there.

If they get wind that there’s someone else in here...”

Weigert cut himself off when he realised that the grin on his friend’s face wouldn’t go away.

"I've got it!"

Claudia lunged towards the screen; Weigert tried to push her aside.

"It can’t be true! You’ve really done it!"

Claudia threw her arms round Peter’s neck and planted a loud, smacking kiss on his cheek. Then she turned back around. Villiger took his place in front of the screen. The other two stared spellbound at what had appeared there and was now

—no longer encrypted—presented itself to the viewers’ eyes.

110

“Have you looked through it all yet? How did you manage it? Is

it…?”

Weigert could barely contain his excitement.

"No, for heaven's sake! I haven't had a chance to look at everything yet. And how I managed it is completely irrelevant now. The code has been cracked, that's the main thing! And now let's take a moment to check what Uncle Martin has left to our Hans."

Claudia was the first to comment on it.

“Names, addresses, phone numbers, dates of birth, job titles, brief CVs! Good heavens! What on earth is that for?”

Villiger kept flicking through the file so quickly that you couldn’t keep up. Finally, he reached the end.

"That’s it! A list of people with addresses and a few biographical notes on each. Nothing else. A bit meagre, isn’t it?”

“What’s meagre about it!? This list could be of the utmost importance to us.”

“And what significance, if I may ask? Who are the people listed there?”

Weigert had an idea. "How many

are there?"

Villiger pressed a few buttons.

"Strange, exactly 333."

“Come on, try the second CD!”

Villiger did as he was told. Here, too, he cracked the code using the same method as with the first one. The result was identical to before: another list of people structured in the same way, though – at least at first glance

—with different names.

“How many are there?”

“Our Frenchman seems to have been a joker. That’s 333 as well.”

"So, altogether we’re looking at 666 names. Cheers! Can you link both files and check whether any name
appears?”

“Am I a beginner? Of course I can do that.” A few

seconds later, the result was there.

"There isn’t a single full name that appears twice or more. A few surnames and a few first names are identical, but that’s hardly
big surprise with 666 people."

"Let's carry on! Now look for Bernhard Volker! Go on!"

"Yeah, I'm on it... Nothing there, he's not in the system."

"Alan Greenspan."

Villiger pressed a few keys again.

“He’s not there either. Now you’re bound to want to look for Oleg Garakin as well, aren’t you?”

“You’ve guessed it, old boy!”

“No such person. There’s no one like that here

either.” Now Claudia chimed in.

“Try Karl Steiner. Maybe we’ll have a bit more luck there.”

They were right. The record appeared on the screen: “Steiner, Karl. Born: 9 September 1918.

Joined the SS: 1 January 1937. Posted to Wewelsburg. Initiated: 21 December 1940.

Left for Tibet on 7 July 1942 as a member of an SS expedition. Has lived in Tibet ever since. Contact via Tashi Lhunpo Monastery."

Suddenly there was a clap. Weigert had struck his forehead with the flat of his hand.

“Of course! That’s it! Do you know what this list is supposed to be?”

Villiger had no time for guessing games at that moment. He was too busy retrieving the whisky bottle that had fallen under the desk. So it was Claudia’s turn.

“I have a hunch. But I don’t want to steal your thunder.”

Peter took a hearty swig from the recovered bottle. There was just one last sip left. He held it up.

“Anyone else want some?”

111

Weigert simply ignored his friend’s offer.

"Steiner did say that, especially towards the end of the Second World War, a whole host of Agarthans – or rather, Thule people – have been brought out of Germany, as Steiner said: to return in a distant hour in a different form. That was the survival structure
of Agarthi beyond the Third Reich. And this list contains the names of those men and women!"

"You idiot!"

Since no one had taken him up on his offer, Villiger simply helped himself to the last sip of whisky.

"What use is that to us? Do you think they've all got a fountain of youth, like Steiner? They're all looking at the radishes from below already!"

"Listen, Peter. Can you sort the names by date of birth and work out how many were born in each decade?"

"By now it should be clear to you that such tricks are possible. So go on."

It took five minutes. Then Villiger had the result.

"Only three were born before 1920. Seventeen were born between 1920 and 1930. A total of 25 people were born between 1930 and 1940. Then we'll take a brief break. Between 1940 and
the end of the war, 48 were born. That means the vast majority of the remaining 573

people were all born after the end of the Second World War. Do you want a more detailed breakdown as well?"

"Yes. See how many of them are under 20." "Just a

moment… That's… only eight."

"That can't be true! In my opinion, what we have here can only be the list of Agarthian followers living today!"

“And what about those born after 1945?”

"They were recruited by the Thule group – those who managed to flee Germany in time – and eventually initiated into the fold. Or perhaps they are their children. The organisation is determined to survive and pass on its supposed secrets, no matter what is happening around it. Steiner made that perfectly clear, after all."

Claudia spoke up from the background.

“The only question that remains is how Martin got hold of this list.”

“No idea. In any case, he can’t tell us anymore.”

“And what if he was one of Steiner’s people after all? Then it would make perfect sense that the Shamballah killed him, just as Steiner told you.”

“Yes, that’s possible. Print out the contents of the list and copy the file, Peter.”

Claudia had stood up and was pacing up and down the room. Suddenly she stopped.

"Let’s suppose you’re right, Hans. Steiner did hint to you that his ghosts are to be brought back to life very soon. In that case, all these people would probably play a part in it."

“If I’m right and if Steiner wasn’t lying, then that could well be the case. After all, since we’ve been looking into Garakin’s murder, Steiner’s statements have certainly carried more weight.”

“That would give us a real bombshell. We could stop Agarthi.”

“I wouldn’t know how.”

“It’s simple. We hand the list over to UN intelligence.”

"And that includes Shambhala, the counterpart to Agartha, about which we don't even know whether the same madmen aren't hiding behind it in a different guise. I don't like the methods of Steiner and his ilk. But I couldn't say that I
approach of the other side much more appealing."

"There's something in that. But what else could we do?" Villiger

interrupted their conversation.

"Agarthi, Shambhala and who knows what else! We've got a list of names here, nothing else.

None of you can prove at the moment what this is really all about. Have you all lost your minds!? Or has this Steiner already completely infected you with his occult conspiracy theories!?"

112

Weigert was slowly getting angry at his friend's constant criticism.

"You're really starting to get on my nerves! Why can't you just take note of the most obvious thing for once and believe what Steiner said? By now, we surely have enough circumstantial evidence to suggest he wasn't telling us a load of rubbish! In Garakin's case, we've at least established that his wife denied the crime in court.
And her alibi—a friend of Garakin's wife, with whom she was at the time of the crime—strangely enough died in a car accident during the trial. Steiner's statements don't seem to be completely made up!"

"And what if we've fallen into a trap? What if it was all staged to fit together like a neat little jigsaw puzzle? What then, you smart alec!?"

"So who's the one believing in conspiracy theories now? That's just…"

Villiger stood up.

"Do whatever you like. I'm going to get myself a drink."

He left the room. Claudia watched him go, then turned to Weigert.

"We don't have to pass the list on to the UN intelligence service, do we?"
What if we just hinted that we had such a list
? And as a precondition, before we hand it over, we want a meeting with someone from the Shamballah. If they play dumb and have no idea what we're talking about, then..."

Weigert interrupted her.

“Then we’re back to square one. But if they’re interested in the list, they’ll come and get it. And they’ll do it straight away. I don’t know what demands we could make.”

“They can only get what’s actually there.”

“Have you forgotten that they’re lurking outside the door? We could only hide it here in the house, and they’d find it, even if they had to tear down every wall.”

"Wrong, my dear. What about our trump card? Our friends at the UN clearly don’t know that Peter is here."

“So you want to send him off to bury the CDs somewhere or stow them away in a bank safe?”

“Why not? The list is our only trump card that gives us a real stake in the game. And if we want to play, we’ve still got a lot of groundwork to do. Time is of the essence, assuming, of course, that Steiner wasn’t just fantasising. We need to ring Carlsson and arrange a meeting. If he really wants the list, we have to make it clear to him in a credible way that there’s no point in arresting and interrogating us. And we can only do that if we ourselves don’t know where it’s hidden.”

"So you think Peter is putting himself at risk of going from code-breaker to the hunted?

And what about us? Claudia, we’re journalists, not agents! This isn’t a film, it’s bloody reality!”

"That’s exactly why. Or do you want Steiner and his lot to be able to carry out their plans unhindered?"

“And what if we publish the list?”

"That would be possible. But what if the UN secret service or the Shamballah have no interest in that happening? They covered up the murder of

Garakin. They tried to do the same with Volker. They probably couldn't prevent the list from being published, but they could prevent the full truth from coming to light."

"Is it the truth?"

"What is truth, anyway? The world of an SS man in present-day Tibet, or ours?"

"You're starting to sound just like Steiner!"

"You saw him yourself. Is he real or not?" Weigert was silent

for a moment. Then he sighed.

"So you really want to throw yourself fully into this war?"

"Aren't we already right in the thick of it? Or should we close our eyes and ears and—

Now that it's all over – do we have to ask how it could all have happened? We're at war, Hans.

At first, to paraphrase Brecht, none of us wanted to go. But then the war came to us.

Do we have any choice but to fight alongside them?"

"I'm afraid not."

113

> Bolzano, 16 December

The Joker was ready. At exactly 4.25 am, Peter Villiger pulled a light-coloured cap over his long, blond hair and reported: “Ready.”
His mission was clearly defined. He was to sneak out of the house unseen and walk down to Bolzano. Claudia had parked her car there that afternoon when she’d visited her parents. Her father had driven her back in his car. The UN people who’d followed her hadn’t aroused any suspicion. Villiger now had the key to Claudia’s Alfa and the vehicle documents in his trouser pocket. The drive would only take him about an hour, as he would be switching to a hire car as soon as he reached Trento.

Claudia’s brother was supposed to pick up the Alfa that very morning and park it outside their parents’ house again. At least, that was the plan.

At the same time, Claudia had used the visit to withdraw 30 million lire from her account.

The money was now hidden in Villiger’s anorak, right next to the two CDs. It would have to be enough to get to Rome and
carry out some legal and some less legal business. Peter’s most important partner in this would be Livio Lucentini, about whom the Roman police files mentioned a close relationship with the Mafia.

Claudia had met him a few years ago in an upmarket restaurant on the Tiber. He had fascinated her from the very first moment, and so it came to pass that they ended up in bed straight after dinner. It hadn’t led to a relationship. But the two met a few times a year and got on splendidly, despite the considerable age difference. Even after Lucentini had let Claudia in on his double life one day, nothing had changed.

Once in Rome, Villiger was to make contact with the grey-haired member of the honourable society and have false papers issued. After a lengthy discussion with Claudia, Weigert and his friend had agreed that Lucentini should also procure pistols for them.

Not that they were entirely convinced they actually needed them. But too much blood had already been shed, and too many dead bodies littered the path from Agarthi to Shambhala.

The three friends were already too deeply entangled in the maelstrom to count on being spared. Better safe than sorry. And since Villiger had already made contact with Lucentini, he might as well sort that out straight away. Claudia had graciously declined a weapon.

Equipped with a new identity, Villiger was then to take the next step: rent a room in an inconspicuous hotel and a safe deposit box at a bank. The safe was to house the two silver discs from Pierre Martin's estate.

Tomorrow, at 6 pm sharp, the go-ahead was due. A call to Claudia's house, let it ring three times, then hang up. Then do the whole thing again. Should Villiger not have managed to make all the necessary arrangements by then, there was a second deadline at noon the following day. If he still hadn't got in touch by then, he had failed. Should the UN secret service catch him, Weigert and Apollonio would find out beforehand anyway. But if he fulfilled his mission as agreed, then his call would be the starting signal for Hans and Claudia.

"All clear?"

Weigert looked his friend in the eye.

"Sure. I feel just like I did back then, in the army. You know what I mean, Hans,
"that sense of anticipation mixed with a flutter in the stomach whenever it came to playing a bit of cops and robbers with the supposed enemy."

"Just make sure everything goes as smoothly as it did back then."

"Don't you remember? I was always the best in our company at those games back then."

"I do remember. But don’t forget that this isn’t a game today. It’s our only chance to get the list of names to safety."

“Don’t worry, they won’t catch me.”

Villiger had always been the most sceptical of the three. He still had his doubts as to whether the story Hans and Claudia were investigating was really such a big deal. But now that they were moving from the computer to the real world, he didn’t care. He was starting to find it rather fun.

114

Claudia had peered through the windows to see if the people from UN intelligence –

at least those she could see – had changed their positions. Now she joined the two men.

“Everything’s the same out there. A car on the road in front of the house and one on the dirt track behind it. Nothing else is visible.”

Villiger’s body tensed.

“Right then. Tell the adventurer I’m coming.”

Claudia stood on tiptoe and kissed him. Her eyes, which usually reflected the joy in her heart, now looked uncertain and almost sad.

“Please take care of yourself.”

“You can count on it.”

Hans Weigert patted his friend on the shoulder as he said goodbye.

"Cheer up!"

“No problem in this cold. Right, now let the mutt off the lead.”

Claudia went into the kitchen and took up position by the window. Her job was to warn the other two if anyone got out of the car in front of the house or if it started moving. Weigert, peering cautiously out of one of the two large living-room windows, kept an eye on the second vehicle.

The UN officials inside were in the more dangerous position as far as Villiger was concerned. For he had to go through the door into the garden and cross it. Only once he had climbed over the fence undetected would he be in relative safety. From the car that had pulled up on the dirt track, one couldn’t see the door directly, but one could
overlook about two-thirds of the garden.

Villiger had opened the door just a crack.

Cold, crisp air hit him and made him shiver. The radio had forecast early morning temperatures of minus four degrees. He peered outside. It had been snowing until an hour ago. The snow was only a few centimetres deep, but it would be enough to make the morning
to leave no trace. Claudia and Hans would take care of that by running about in the garden a bit as soon as it got light. After all, the UN people shouldn’t realise that there was a wild card in play.

The night was very dark. The snow-laden clouds let through none of the light from the stars or the moon. The house stood very isolated, just outside a small settlement. The road in front of it was unlit. Villiger was well aware that the darkness was of little use to him. His opponents were undoubtedly equipped with night-vision goggles or infrared glasses. He had experienced such things in the military and

knew just how devilishly well that stuff worked. What he needed was luck.

Villiger drew the cold air deep into his lungs once more, then his body slipped through the gap. Ten to fifteen metres ahead, he saw the outline of a large fir tree. It would be his first stop. Behind it, in the darkness, began the rose bushes, which, of course, at this time of year
. They would offer him little cover. There he would have to crawl along the ground. Where they ended, it was another five metres to the hedge that wound its way right along the garden fence. He carefully closed the door behind him and set off.

“Hey, wake up!”

The UN intelligence officer shook his colleague, who had dozed off beside him in the car. The two had agreed that they would take turns staying awake for an hour whilst the other slept. They had been on duty since midnight.

They were expecting their relief at six o’clock. The auxiliary heating protected them from the cold outside. The only things to help against the boredom were the radio and a few newspapers.

“What’s going on? Is my hour up already?”

He glanced at his watch. When he saw that there was still just over a quarter of an hour to go before the agreed handover with his colleague, he wanted to protest. In vain, for his colleague switched off the interior light and cut him off.

“Something moved over there in the

garden!” “Are you sure?”

“I think so.”

115

He pressed the night-vision goggles to his eyes and peered through the window.

"What do you mean, 'you think'? You were just reading the paper. How can you be so sure there's someone walking about out there?"

Both of them were now staring intently towards the garden surrounding the house, one with the naked eye, the other through the glass.

"Bloody hell, I wish we'd brought an infrared device. The low-light amplifier isn't much use here either. We'd better go and have a look."

"Do you know how cold it is out there?"

"Yes, minus eleven according to the on-board computer's

thermometer." "There you go."

"And what if there really is someone out there?"

"Did you see movement or a person?" "Movement. A shadow or

something."

"Now listen here. We're in the middle of nowhere here. It's perfectly normal for a hare or a deer or some other animal to be wandering about. This job's already got me fed up. We've been sitting round here for days and don't know exactly what for. I really can't be bothered to freeze my arse off out there just to scare a hare. If you're so keen, why don't you go and have a look yourself."

He sank back into his seat to go back to sleep. The other man stared intently out of the window for a few more seconds, then set the night-vision goggles aside. He switched the interior light back on and picked up the newspaper.

Villiger had now reached the hedge by the fence. Through the branches, he glanced towards the car, which was parked about fifty metres away. Strange. The interior light had been on just a moment ago. He stood motionless. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness. But they could make out nothing more than the outline of the vehicle.

He could feel his heart pounding. What should he do if someone got out and came towards him? Overpower him? Hardly, for there were two of them. And another two in front of the house. Run away?

Not exactly the best-case scenario either. He might well have a fair chance of getting away, but then the UN people would turn their attention to Hans and Claudia. And they wouldn't be able to provide a plausible explanation for why someone had been pottering about in the garden and had eventually run off.

There! Now the interior lights were on again. They must have noticed something. But it hadn't been enough to make them get out. Two minutes passed and nothing happened.

Villiger sat up very slowly and worked his way through the hedge. A twig brushed against his face and scratched his skin. He reached for the chest-high wire mesh and swung himself over it. Almost silently, he let himself slide to the ground on the other side. One last glance back, but everything remained quiet.

Ahead of him lay the woodland, menacing and offering shelter at the same time. He had to cross it, which was no easy feat in the darkness. And above all, he had to emerge at the right end and then head straight for the town, where Claudia's car was parked. He could have made it in just under an hour. But if he strayed too far from the path, it would cost him a lot of time, and he didn't have that.

Villiger set off cautiously. He concentrated entirely on the ground so as not to step on any branches, the crackling of which might have given him away. After all, there was no way of knowing whether anyone else was here apart from the four men in the two cars. Apart from his instincts, he had

virtually no means of orientation. The moon and stars were nowhere to be seen, and he had no compass either. He knew only that after
about two hundred metres he would come across a small path that ran along the edge of the forest and led down to Bolzano.

Back then, in the army, he, Hans and their comrades had done this sort of thing do this dozens of times. Now Villiger could rely entirely on his instincts, which had been honed during that time. And indeed: a quarter of an hour later, he was standing on the narrow path. After 39 minutes of running, he had reached Claudia's Alfa. He was panting heavily, but he felt good about it. The UN secret service, Shambhala,
Agarthi or whoever else: they had lost this round. Villiger started the engine. The Joker was on his way.

116

Rome, 16 December

"May I offer you something to drink? A cognac, perhaps?"

Livio Lucentini was an old-school sort through and through. Perhaps one of the last of his kind. Peter Villiger had already picked up on that much. And he knew how to live. Not just because he'd offered Villiger a cognac.

From the outside, the Lucentini house looked extremely unassuming. Yet its interior housed furnishings that would have done credit to any international antiques fair. By no means ostentatious, but extremely tasteful. The only thing that marred the picture slightly were the men who had received Villiger and escorted him to their boss. Not that they were
were rough-and-ready thugs. But one could see that they did not come from the sort of background that the tasteful surroundings suggested at first glance. Undoubtedly, they were in the

position to escort uninvited visitors back outside in a most unceremonious, yet exceedingly efficient manner. And that was probably one of the least of the tasks for which they were paid.

“Do you perhaps have whisky as well?”

Villiger only changed his habits when he absolutely had to. “Scotch? Bourbon?

Malt?”

“Malt, please.”

"A good choice, Mr Villiger. Would you like an ice cream

too?" "No ice cream, just a splash of water."

Lucentini walked over to the bar, which, in terms of size and, above all, its selection, could certainly hold its own against that of a good hotel. At the sight of it, Villiger felt almost a twinge of envy. He watched the grey-haired man as he poured the whisky into a
crystal glass. So this gentleman was a member of what was usually described as respectable society. Until now, Villiger had only known men like this from films. The difference from reality wasn’t actually all that great, he thought. But had he expected something different, given the description Claudia had given him?

“Here, please.”

Lucentini handed Villiger the glass and sat down opposite him in a delicate armchair. Rococo, Villiger surmised. Or perhaps not. He didn’t know much about such things.

“Cheers!”

The grey-haired man raised his glass to his guest. Villiger took a hearty swig.

"So Claudia sent you because she needs help?"

“Quite right.”

The mafioso’s features were relaxed and friendly. Yet there was something in his gaze of the glaring brightness of a lamp used during interrogations to try and rob the alleged culprit of sleep.

“Why doesn’t she contact me herself?”

Villiger had anticipated this question. Claudia had instructed him to reveal as many facts as possible, if necessary. He decided to try a homeopathic dose for the time being.

“She can’t, without putting herself—and you—in danger. Certain… authorities are hot on her heels.”

“Could you be a bit more specific? Which authorities?”

“To be precise, possibly the police. But certainly the United Nations Secret Service.”

“The World Intelligence Service?”

“Yes.”

Villiger took another sip from his glass. The next question would probably be ‘Why?’. He wondered.

“How do you know Claudia?”

“Through a mutual friend. He met her whilst studying at the University of Bologna. She invited him to Bolzano back then and I came along. We’ve been seeing each other once or twice a year ever since.”

117

Lucentini's expression softened slightly. "Is this

mutual friend a journalist, by any chance?"

"Yes. He works… or rather, he used to work for an Austrian newspaper."

Lucentini leaned back and studied Villiger. Then he set down his glass. There was silence for a few seconds.

"May I assume that this journalist is Hans Weigert?"

"You may. It is Hans Weigert."

What was going on now? Had Lucentini heard about Weigert's difficulties? He probably kept a closer eye on the newspapers and television than most. That could certainly be useful in his line of work, too.

"So that's why the malt whisky."

Lucentini smiled. Weigert was completely baffled.

"Pardon?"

"Claudia has told me about Mr Weigert a few times. And about you too, although I must admit I couldn't remember your name."

Now Villiger had to smile too.

"I hope she's only told you about our good points."

“I think so. I read about your friend’s investigations in the newspaper. And not just that. Also about the problems he’s having. Is he staying with Claudia in Bolzano?”

"At the moment, yes. But the two of them aren’t entirely on their own. The UN intelligence service has, so to speak, set up a new outpost around the house."

"Why haven’t they arrested him yet?"

"Hans, or rather, all three of us, are on the trail of a story. You know what it’s about if you’ve been following the papers. They want to silence Hans by pinning two murders on him that he didn’t commit. The UN secret service has given him an ultimatum. Either he returns to the newspaper that sacked him and, in return, keeps his hands off further investigations into the matter, or he will be arrested. The secret service believes it has him and Claudia under their control anyway, since the house where the two of them are staying is under surveillance. That is why they have given him a week to think it over. But the service doesn’t know that I was in the house too. And it doesn’t know that we’ve managed to get hold of documents that could be of the utmost importance to certain circles. To ensure these documents don’t fall into the wrong hands, we must, at least for the time being, get them to safety.”

Villiger hoped he hadn’t given too much away. Claudia or no Claudia, he didn’t entirely trust Lucentini.

“And you need my help with that?”

Finally, they were getting down to business. Villiger was glad about that.

“Actually, we only need a few small things. And we’re prepared to pay a fair price for them.”

“What do you need?”

“Documents in false names for me and Claudia, and two pistols.”

Lucentini pointed at Villiger's glass.

"Another one?"

"Yes, please."

He stood up and went to the bar. As he poured, he glanced over at Villiger.

"You said there were three of you: Claudia, you and Mr Weigert. But you only need documents for two. From this I conclude that the passport I sent to Claudia about two weeks ago was intended for Mr Weigert. Is that correct?"

"That's right. Hans had to go abroad for our investigations."

What now? Would Lucentini send him away empty-handed because the Weigert business was getting too hot for him? He had his own business to attend to as well. Lucentini could hardly afford any trouble with the UN secret service. He probably had enough to deal with the police as it was.

The mafioso emerged from behind the bar, placed two freshly filled glasses on the table and sat down.

Villiger took the initiative.

118

"Listen, I need this stuff as soon as possible. Will you help us?"

Lucentini raised his glass to him and took a sip of cognac.

"I don’t know what Claudia has told you about my relationship with her. But I hope she didn’t seriously believe that I would let her down when she was in trouble."

A weight was lifted from Villiger’s mind. “Of course

we’ll pay for…”

“Are you trying to embarrass me? You’ll get whatever you and your friends need. Without paying for it, of course. Do you have any photos of yourself and Claudia with you for the papers?”

“Yes, of course.”

Villiger rummaged in his pockets and produced an envelope.

“Here.”

Lucentini looked at the passport photos that Weigert had taken of the two of them in Bolzano.

“Claudia has only changed her hairstyle a little. You look exactly as you do sitting here in front of me now. Not exactly very original.”

“Unfortunately, there wasn’t time to do any more in the rush.”

“I see. You said you also want two pistols?”

"Yes. We don't think we'll need them, but you never know." "Do you have

another three or four hours to spare?"

"I suppose so. Without proper papers, I can’t do anything at the moment anyway."

"Can you play chess?"

"I can manage. But my best days are long gone."

“Then may I suggest we play a game? In the meantime, my people will take care of your needs.”

119

> Bolzano, 17 December

The antique grandfather clock in the living room showed four minutes to six. It had only two hands, one for the hours and one for the minutes.
As soon as 60 seconds had passed, the minute hand jumped to the next mark. The clock signalled the start of the hour by means of
a chime. 240 seconds to go, then it would sound again.

Claudia Apollonio and Hans Weigert sat side by side on the sofa. Both were nervously smoking their cigarettes. Otherwise, they were silent. Their guards in front of and behind the house had left them undisturbed so far. So they hadn’t caught the Joker. Whether Peter Villiger had been equally successful with Livio Lucentini in Rome, however, was anyone’s guess.

One minute to go. Claudia stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray. She stood up and began pacing up and down the room. Weigert’s gaze was fixed on the clock hands. 6 pm. The chimes rang out, spreading
its bright melody. Twenty seconds later, it was over. The mobile phone lying on the table in front of Weigert still hadn’t made a sound.

Claudia paused, took two steps towards the table and fished for the cigarette packet.

With jerky movements, she took out a cigarette and reached for the lighter to light it. As she brought the flame to the tip

Just as she finished the cigarette, the phone started to buzz. She held her breath. Instead of looking at the clock, she fixed her gaze on the phone.

Once, twice, three times. Then the buzzing stopped. “Peter’s

done it.”

Claudia’s words were matter-of-fact, devoid of any triumph. After all, the game with Schamballah was only just beginning. Weigert merely nodded. The buzzing sounded again. Three times more, before it stopped.

“We can start.”

“Stop! Let’s wait another half an hour. The call will of course have been tapped, even if they can’t make sense of it. But if we contact Carlsson right now, they might get suspicious.”

“OK. I’ll make us some coffee in the meantime.”

The half-hour passed agonisingly slowly. But finally the time came, and Weigert picked up the phone and dialled Carlsson’s office number.
He picked up immediately.

“Ah, Mr Weigert. I wasn’t expecting you this early. According to our agreement, you still had three days left. Is the weather bad in Bolzano?”

His voice sounded both cynical and confident. But he’d get over it in time.

“Spare me the pleasantries. I’ve made my decision.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So can I tell your boss that he can expect you back soon?”

“I’m afraid I must disappoint you.”

“So may I then give the order to my colleagues outside your house to arrest you?”

“I’m afraid I must disappoint you on that point as

well.” “Who or what is going to stop me?”

"Me."

“I beg to differ…”

Weigert cut him off brusquely. He had no desire for a long-winded discussion right now.

"Listen carefully now, Carlsson. I won’t repeat myself. Write down exactly what I’m about to tell you."

The firmness in Weigert’s voice seemed to unsettle the UN intelligence officer. Now was the moment of truth. His reaction would show whether Hans Weigert’s trio was on the right track.

"Firstly: I know about Agarthi and Shambhala. Secondly: I am in possession of a list of exactly 666 names. These names are those of Agarthi’s current sleeper agents, who are just waiting to be awakened again.”

Carlsson’s reaction was more than clear. He didn’t even bother to hide the utter astonishment that was etched on his face. His mouth remained slightly open, his eyes had widened slightly more than just a moment before.

120

So they were on the right track. Wewelsburg, Tibet, Steiner, Agarthi, Shambhala. So it was actually true. Although Weigert had hardly doubted it, this final realisation came as a shock to him. For a few seconds, neither of them said a word. Then Carlsson had regained his composure.

"You know we could take that list from you at any time." The sentence

sounded more like a question than a threat.

“Of course I know that. And that’s why I’ve taken precautions. I no longer have that list. It’s in a safe place that neither I nor my girlfriend know about. So if you have us arrested, you’ll have gained absolutely nothing, not a single thing.”

“And what have you gained by not handing the list over to the authorities?”

“I haven’t said I won’t do that. But first I have a small request, which I’m sure you won’t refuse.”

"You want to blackmail the UN intelligence service?"

"That’s a nasty word. I want to do a fair deal with you. That’s what you said to me during our last phone call. Do you remember?"

"Damn it! What do you want?"

"Not much. Just a conversation with an insider from Shambhala." "And after

that, will you hand over the list?"

"Perhaps. It will depend on how that conversation goes. In any case, I must stress once again that there is no point in arresting me or
Claudia. We can’t say anything because we ourselves don’t know where the list is hidden.”

“But you’ve at least read it?”

“I skimmed through it. But I could only remember three or four names at most. That would be a meagre haul for you. Even if you drugged me, I couldn’t tell you any more.”

“You’ll understand that I can’t give you a definite commitment at the moment.”

“But of course. You have until 6 pm tomorrow. Then I’ll let you know the time and place of the interview I’ve requested.”

“And if we were to refuse your demands?”

"I hardly think that will be the case. I have something your people are desperate to get their hands on. A quick chat is surely a very small price to pay for that. Don’t forget: tomorrow, 6 pm."

Weigert hung up.

121

Vienna, 18 December

The portly American stood in the throng of people, glancing repeatedly up at the display board, whose illuminated letters announced the arrival of one new aircraft after another. Next to him, a little boy was crying. His mother had been trying to calm him down for five minutes – to no avail. Waiting for his aunt – as the woman had tried to explain to him time and again – had clearly become too long for him. Kipling hated children, especially when they couldn’t keep still. He pushed his way
a few metres further to the left whilst trying to get right to the front. From there, you had the best view when the doors to the customs area opened and the next stream of travellers poured into the
arrivals hall.

Time was running out. The display board showed that the flight he was waiting for was 20 minutes late. It was now scheduled to land at 5.25 pm. Then there would be disembarking, waiting for the luggage and – possibly – customs. It would be extremely tight. And no one knew what the Viennese journalist had planned in case the call didn't reach him in time. Just a few kilometres away, Olaf Carlsson sat in one of the glass towers of the UN City, lurking by the telephone. Perhaps he would have to take the call at Weigert's, but perhaps he would also have to give his men the order to strike. Thomas Beckett would have to make the decision as soon as he stepped out of that door.

Joe Kipling had already glanced at his watch dozens of times. When he did so again, it was 5.20 pm.

At that very moment, the green light next to the flight number that had caught the lawyer's attention flashed. At last! The plane had landed. Another flood of passengers was just pouring through the door. Impossible, Beckett couldn't be among them yet. People were throwing their arms round each other's necks, kissing, handing out their luggage to those waiting. Cheerful laughter, shouts, the barking of dogs. The stream of people spilling out of the restricted area grew thinner, disappearing into the crowd in the arrivals hall

The waiting crowd fell silent and then fell completely silent. The door closed. Just under a quarter of an hour passed before it opened again. The clock now read 5.34 pm.

Kipling spotted Beckett straight away. He was one of the first to step out into the hall. Unlike many others, his body was not bent under the weight of heavy luggage. Beckett carried only a small leather travel bag in his right hand and a coat over his left arm. Kipling waved. Beckett came towards him.

"Hello, Joe. I hope you didn't have to wait too long."

"Not at all, Thomas. I'm sorry if I'm jumping straight into things. But time is rather short."

"That doesn't sound very promising. Do you have a car?" "Yes, it's

parked over there by the exit. Come on."

The men set off. Kipling turned around. The two UN officials whom Carlsson had assigned to protect them were pushing their way through the crowd just a few metres behind them. When they reached the car, the driver got out to stow Beckett's luggage in the boot. Whilst the men got into the back seat, he remained standing beside the vehicle and lit a cigarette. Kipling had explained to him beforehand that he and his visitor wanted to talk in private. The man had understood. It wasn't the first assignment of this kind he'd taken on.

"What's so important?"

"I'm sorry we couldn't reach you sooner. We tried everywhere, but it was impossible."

"I know. A few discussions were necessary. You'll understand that I didn't want to brief my secretaries on it."

"Of course."

Kipling glanced at his watch again. It really was time to tell Beckett without beating about the bush.

122

“The journalist has been in touch.”

Beckett didn’t grasp it straight

away.

“Which one?”

Kipling groaned involuntarily.

“Hans Weigert. He’s contacted the UN Secret Service to give us his response to the ultimatum we issued him.”

“I suppose he’s complied?”

“Not at all. He’s issued us with an ultimatum. And it expires in twelve minutes.”

Beckett reached into the bar at the back of the car and took out a small bottle of cognac and a glass.

“What does he want?”

“What he wants is less important. What he has is of far greater significance.”

Beckett opened the vial and poured the contents into the tumbler. Meanwhile, Kipling continued speaking.

“He knows more than we ever imagined. And he claims to be in possession of a list of the sleepers of Agarthi. Weigert actually used that name: Agarthi. The list contains 666 names, he says.”

“666!?”

The glass was set down, untouched.

“That can’t be true! We only have a dozen names!”

“We don’t have much time, Thomas. He wants an answer by 6 pm.” “To

what?”

“His demand is a meeting with an initiate from Shambhala.”

“I suppose he’s used that word too?” “Exactly.”

“So, why don’t we have him arrested?”

"Because he claims that the list is stored in a place he doesn’t even know himself. So he must have contacts working for him. Arresting him wouldn’t do much good."

“Damn it! How on earth did it come to this, that you now have no idea where the list is!?”

As Beckett sat up straight as a die, Kipling sank further back into the upholstery.

“The UN secret service had him and his girlfriend under round-the-clock surveillance. It must have happened before we tracked him down in Bolzano.”

“That was only necessary because those UN blokes messed up for the second time after the Martin affair! I’ve had enough of this!”

Kipling pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the beads of sweat from his face. He found the situation extremely embarrassing.

"We only have a few minutes left. And we don't know what will happen to Weigern's list if we don't get in touch."

"Why is he so keen to speak to one of us?"

"I don't know. He didn't say anything about that. I was thinking we should send Carlsson. He's the deputy head of the UN
Secret Service in Vienna. Not exactly a big shot here, but he could strike immediately with his people if Weigert slips up."

"And mess it all up again. No, absolutely not. It has to be someone from the upper echelons who speaks to Weigert. Because if he really does have the list of the Agarthans, then he might know a lot more."
"We need to find out how much and what. Perhaps he can help us."

Beckett glanced at his watch. It was 5.58 pm. "Do you have the

number where we can reach Weigert?" Kipling pulled a piece of

paper out of his pocket and handed it to Beckett.

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"Are you planning to ring him yourself?"

"Yes. But I'll switch off the camera so he only hears my voice."

“Is your German good enough for that?”

“Yes. But Weigert will have to make do with English. I hate speaking German.”

Beckett reached for the car phone and dialled. When Hans Weigert picked up in Bolzano, his screen remained dark.

“Who’s speaking?”

"That’s beside the point, Mr Weigert. You wanted an answer to your ultimatum."

“Quite right. Are you part of Shamballa?”

“If I say yes now, what proof would that be?” “None. But what

happens to the list in my possession
will also depend on your answers to my questions. I trust I may assume that you are willing to meet?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then let me get straight to the point. Tomorrow is a bit tight. So I suggest the day after tomorrow. Where are you at the moment?”

Beckett hesitated briefly. But what did it matter if he told the truth?

“In Vienna.”

"Just as I thought. Vienna seems to be a busy place. If I remember correctly, there’s a flight from Vienna to Rome every day at 2 pm. That means you could easily be in Rome the day after tomorrow afternoon between half past five and six."

"That could work."

"You wouldn't have any other choice, Mr Unknown. Now for the exact location. A small street leads off the west side of Piazza Navona. There's a café on the corner. Sit down there and place the latest issue of *Blatt* clearly in front of you. No one else in Rome is likely to be reading it anyway. So there's no chance of any mix-ups. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I'm not deaf."

"So, be on time. And one more thing: I've already pointed out to the UN Secret Service that there's absolutely no point in arresting me or Claudia Apollonio. Neither of us knows where the list is. So make sure no one gets any silly ideas."

"If you yourself have no way of getting hold of the list, how can you fulfil your part of the agreement?"

"You're misunderstanding me. When I say I don't know where the list is, that doesn't mean I have no way of getting hold of it. And there's certainly no question of any agreement in which I've committed myself to anything. Perhaps you'll get the list.

Or perhaps not."

"You're playing a damn high-stakes game, Weigert."

"Would you do anything different if you were in

my shoes?" "Hardly."

"There you go. And the fact that I'm in this situation is, after all, down to you and your lot. So: the day after tomorrow, 5.30 pm, Piazza Navona, Rome. See you then."

Beckett put down the receiver and turned to Kipling. "Weigert seems to

have a bit more up his sleeve than your
intelligence gorillas."

“They’re not my gorillas.”

"Never mind. We’ll speak to your contact at the UN. Now he might have a chance to make amends for his mistakes. He should get his colleagues in Rome to set up a watertight trap."

"But you heard what I said, it won’t do us any good."

"We’ll see. Perhaps Weigert will slip up during the conversation. Then we must be ready. But things could get much worse..."

“Even worse?”

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“Yes. Have you ever considered what would happen if Weigert were one of Agarthi? Then I’d be sitting in the hot seat. If there really are 666 sleepers and we only know a dozen or so of them, why should we know everything about Weigert?”

Kipling sighed.

“I can’t imagine that.”

“There’s plenty you haven’t been able to imagine. But in any case, we’ll play it safe.

Let’s finally get going.” “And

where to?”

“To your glorious intelligence officer, of course.”

The other two UN officials, who had already followed Kipling and Beckett into the arrivals hall, followed in their car some distance behind.

“What did the Council actually decide, Thomas?”

Kipling had now calmed down a little.

“Not much that would be of any significance to you.”

The way Beckett had pronounced the “for you” was a clear rebuke of Kipling’s never-before-seen position in the hierarchy of the Brothers. “Just this much: we’re going to buy one of the sleepers we already know. As far as I know, one of them lives in Rome anyway.

If Weigert wants to see us there anyway, then we’ll make use of that straight away.”

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Rome, 19 December

Soon the time would come. The big day was just around the corner. The symbol
The reins of destiny would return to the hands of those who deserved them. The fire still smouldered in their hearts, just as it had done for decades. But the initiation would fan the flames and send them blazing high. It would be the starting signal for a new future, beyond which everything that had hitherto held sway would fade away. The new era stood powerfully at the door. It was just waiting for the men of Agarthi to finally throw open the gate. Soon the time would come.

Bettino Agnelli sat up straight and refocused on his work. Now was not the time for such thoughts. He began leafing through the lists lying on his desk in front of him. These contained mainly figures: balance sheet totals, production costs, equity and debt ratios, key figures for individual cost centres, operating expenses and so on. In some places, he jotted down brief notes in the purple ink of his fountain pen.

Agnelli was the head of a renowned management consultancy firm in Rome. With 112 employees and a reputation that many envied,
he was one of the industry's leading figures. Many well-known companies sought his advice. Mergers, restructuring,
rationalisations, diversifications: whenever it came to solving complex business problems, Agnelli and his top
Specialists were always welcome. They weren't cheap, but their track record had by now become legendary. And so people were happy to pay.

Without a doubt, it had brought Agnelli considerable wealth. In one of Rome's upmarket residential districts, he owned a magnificent house surrounded by a beautiful park. Lavish parties were frequently held there, which had become coveted fixtures of Roman society
. Often, these gatherings involved not only drinking French champagne and feasting on Russian caviar, but also doing business. What took place, preferably behind the heavy doors of Agnelli's library, did not always strictly adhere to the letter of the law. And it did happen from time to time that an envelope containing banknotes changed hands,

for instance to obtain building permits, circumvent environmental regulations or sign off on tax returns as correct.

Over the years, Agnelli had built up excellent connections in business and politics.

That in itself would not have been anything out of the ordinary in his position. Moreover, he had kept meticulous records of the vulnerabilities of the people who came and went in his villa and his office. He was rarely present in person during the business dealings and negotiations that took place in his library. People trusted him and regarded his house as neutral ground, as if made for confidential discussions across all fronts. Yet thanks to a hidden
Despite the video surveillance, Agnelli was still aware of every detail. And if his physical presence was ever required, he took great care to ensure there was no evidence of his involvement in any illegal dealings.

His job as a management consultant provided him with further important information about vulnerabilities and grey areas within his clients' companies. And then there were Laura, Jaqueline and Carla. It was thanks to their well-paid services that even the intimate secrets of managers and politicians found their way into his archives. Stefane
supplemented the three, for those cases where a woman's weapons were not sharp enough.

Out in the hinterland of the Eternal City, in the Castelli, stood Agnelli's country house. Whilst his villa in Rome was open to many people, invitations there were an absolute rarity. Only a small circle of close friends was permitted to enter his personal refuge. There, in a sober room to which only he himself held the key, the decisions had been made in recent months as to how Agnelli's contacts and his accumulated knowledge of others' weaknesses were to be utilised in the future.

Agnelli had always been indifferent to his wealth. To him, it was merely a means to an end: to contribute to the rebirth of Agarthi, a rebirth at the cradle of which he too would stand. Very soon...

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He was just making another note on one of the lists when the intercom emitted a faint hum. His secretary's voice came through.

"There's a Mr Schonfeld here who'd like to speak to you. He's a solicitor and says it's extremely urgent."

Schonfeld? Try as he might, Agnelli couldn't remember ever having met a lawyer by that name.

"What does he want?"

"He wouldn't tell me. Just that it's very urgent. He's brought two colleagues with him."

"Right, I'll ask him to come in."

Agnelli gathered up the documents he had been working on and put them in a desk drawer. Just then, the door opened. Three men entered. Agnelli stood up.

"Buon giorno, gentlemen. How can I help you?" "Are

you Bettino Agnelli?"

The voice, speaking in English, contained not a trace of friendliness.

"Who else? What do you want?"

The man who had asked his name was clearly the most senior of the three.

Now he pulled an ID card from his jacket pocket.

“Olaf Carlsson, World Intelligence Service. We’d like you to come with us.”

“This must be a misunderstanding. There’s nothing against me, is there...”

"Not at all. But I’m sure you’ll come along anyway."

“And what makes you so sure?”

“One word: Agarthi.”

Agnelli flinched almost imperceptibly. Meanwhile, an iron fist gripped his stomach. So that was it! Shamballa was striking back. How many did they know about? Was he the only one? Or were they picking up dozens of others all over the world at the very same moment? How had they tracked him down? He mustn’t give up now!

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean by that.” Carlsson gave

him a condescending smile.

“Yes, you do. But let’s not waste too much time arguing about it. You will now tell your secretary that you have to leave urgently on a business trip lasting several days. But you won’t tell her where you’re going.”

“You can’t seriously expect me to go with you? Do you have an arrest warrant?”

“Yes.”

“Without any evidence against me?”

"Paper is patient. What shall I write down?" "This

is the last straw! I'm going to..."

The man to Carlsson's left pulled out a pistol and pointed it at Agnelli.

"You won't do a thing. If you fail to follow Mr Carlsson's instructions, I can become very unpleasant."

"My staff are in the offices all around here. You can't just drag me away from here!"

The man with the pistol grinned.

"Would you prefer me to shoot you in the knee? You would then have resisted arrest, which three UN officials could confirm."

Agnelli felt miserable. He was at their mercy. But if they wanted to take him away, it meant they wanted something from him. They hadn't identified themselves as UN officials to his staff. That didn't bode well. Agnelli decided to play along –

at least for the time being. Agarthi was more important than his

life. Carlsson's voice grew a touch sharper.

"Now tell your secretary at last. And don't forget: no tricks!"

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Rome, 20 December

Thomas Beckett sat at a small table in the café on Piazza Navona. Before him lay the

“Blatt”. The clock above the entrance showed two minutes to six. Hans Weigert was due any moment. Since this morning, however, the journalist had become nothing more than problem number two. The battle had taken a new turn. And Beckett knew that this turn had a significance that far overshadowed everything else.

Agarthi had struck again. This time, it had not been anyone from the The Brotherhood’s chain had been broken. And yet Schamballah had lost something even more precious than human lives: destiny. Seven minutes past midnight, Beckett had woken from his sleep drenched in sweat. It had been the moment when, in Vienna, a hand had triumphantly raised the symbol of power. Beckett had sensed it. The morning news had confirmed it. Agarthi’s storm was imminent. And Beckett didn’t know how he could face it. But perhaps Weigert had a lead.

Claudia parked the Mercedes right in front of the café. They’d been lucky. A space had just become free. Her father’s car was conspicuous, but fast. Perhaps they’d need that later.

“So you really don’t want to come with us?”

“No. Mr Unknown will undoubtedly be more talkative if only one of us goes. If he actually has something of significance to say, he’ll want to ensure there are no other witnesses present. And if he has nothing to say, then it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m staying here.”

Hans Weigert looked around. Piazza Navona was bustling with pre-Christmas activity. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t spot anything that seemed out of the ordinary.

"I know exactly what you're thinking, Hans. But it doesn't matter now anyway. If they really want to catch us, they will. So

it won’t do any good if you spot a secret service agent or a policeman somewhere now. We’ve simply decided to act this way.

And now we have to see it through.”

Weigert looked at her indecisively, as if he wanted to ask whether everything was really as they had planned. A smile flitted across Claudia’s face.

“Right then, Signore Weigert, let’s go! We’re ten minutes late anyway. You don’t want to keep Schamballah waiting, do you?”

“I suppose we’ve got no choice.”

Weigert opened the door and got out. Claudia called after him. “Take

care, and make sure you pull the worms out of his nose!”

“Right.”

That was all Weigert said. Then he slammed the door shut.

Three cars behind the Mercedes, an unremarkable van was parked. On its sides was the logo of a well-known Roman bakery. From the outside, the vehicle looked rather old. Nothing suggested that state-of-the-art technology was hidden beneath the bodywork, which was marred by a few patches of rust. And under the bonnet, which had a sizeable dent on the front left, was a tuned-up engine whose performance was only slightly inferior to that of Claudia’s father’s Mercedes.

"Attention, everyone. Target has arrived. Vehicle: dark blue
Mercedes saloon with Bolzano number plates, parked right in front of the café. Second target, female, remains in the car. Over.”

Ian Roper set the microphone aside. “It was

about time.”

His colleague Trevor Gillis held out a bag of crisps to him.

“Here. Now the waiting really begins.”

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Roper reached into the bag and took out a handful of the baked potato slices.

“Waiting is the worst part of our job. And a large part of this job consists of waiting.”

He popped a few crisps into his mouth. Gillis took a sip of beer from the can.

“You’re right: it’s rubbish. If only there was more going on, it would be easier to bear.”

Roper eyed his colleague, who was sitting with him in the converted cargo area of the van.

“By that you mean something like the incident with the Frenchman and his wife?”

"Maybe. At least that was proper work."

“You’re a bit of a weirdo, Trevor. Sometimes I think you only joined the World Intelligence Service to kill people.”

"It’s just part of the job, like the waiting. Sometimes it has to be done."

“To hell with it! Surely it makes a difference whether you shoot some terrorist or hang an old woman from a ceiling beam!?”

“Why should that old bag be any less dangerous than an Arab with a Kalashnikov in his hand? After all, we don’t always know why we’ve got a job to do. Why should we? The people up there will give us the right orders.”

Gillis took a swig from the can and wiped the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I sometimes doubt that. Or do you have any idea why we should be stuffing bricks into that woman’s bags?"

“A red herring, what else? How often have we left bullet casings, cigarette butts, lipstick marks or whatever else lying around? Did you ask every time what the point of it was, if they didn’t tell you? Let me tell you one thing: thinking is death. Leave that to the lot up there. Meanwhile, we’ll just get on with our job in peace.”

Whilst the two men from the UN secret service were talking, just a few streets away from Piazza Navona, Stefano Lorenzo got off the tram. He wasn’t in any particular hurry, as he was on his way to work. His job, too, was one that sometimes required long waits.

And just like the agents from the World Intelligence Service—though he had no idea they were sitting in their van a few hundred metres away—he too had to act quickly when it mattered.

Stefano Lorenzo had made a name for himself in his line of work. He had grown up in a suburb of Rome, where it was not uncommon for rats to babies. Don, where the police were a more frequent visitor than the postman. Lorenzo had learnt to handle a knife

than with the alphabet. By the age of fifteen, he had already ruled the street where he lived. The older lads had recognised him because he had sought his way to the top with greater determination and without compromise.

It had been ten years already, on one of those Easter weekends when Rome was full of tourists, all wanting a glimpse of the Pope. Stefano Lorenzo had never understood why this man was so idolised. Whilst he was rambling on in countless countries about the starving in the Third World, campaigning against the sin of abortion or speaking of the new evangelisation of Europe, he, little Stefano, was fighting for his survival in the slums of Rome. In streets where this Holy Father had never once set foot. Yet they would have been just a few minutes' drive from the Vatican.

As I said, one Easter weekend ten years ago – or was it
'Eleven already?' – that was when Stefano Lorenzo, then just 17 years old, stole his first Porsche. A red one. Just like that. The German tourist who owned it
could afford a new one, he'd thought.

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But after Stefano had been tearing through the city in the sports car for a few hours, a police patrol had been hot on his heels, not

because of the stolen car, but for exceeding the speed limit. Stefano had been faster than the officers. Six or seven blocks further on, he'd shaken them off. But as he didn't want to get caught, he'd immediately driven to a friend who ran a garage. Selling the Porsche had netted him twenty million lire. Not bad by his standards at the time.

And so he had decided to specialise in car theft from then on. By now, he was one of the best car thieves Rome had ever seen. In certain circles, he was something of a legend. When he had a job, he delivered exactly what was asked for, however strange some requests might be. Once, someone had ordered a proper fire engine. Lorenzo had stolen it during a major fire, right under the police's noses. Three days later, he had discovered that the vehicle had been used in a terrorist attack.

Since then, he had been a little more cautious with such special assignments.

When he was out on a 'free hunt', so to speak, he took only the cream of the crop, preferably luxury cars of foreign origin, which was not to say, of course, that as an Italian patriot he spared Ferraris or Maseratis. But a Mercedes remains a Mercedes. Even in Italy.

Stefano Lorenzo turned up his collar. The wind was cold, at least by Roman standards, and it had started to drizzle lightly. Let's see what awaited him today, so close to Christmas.

A few steps and Weigert had reached the entrance to the café. He stepped inside and looked around. The décor was simple and, for someone accustomed to Viennese coffee house culture, downright tasteless. Plastic and chrome. But at least it was clean. A plump woman, in her fifties, stood behind the counter and was busy washing a few cups. About half the tables were occupied. Weigert let his gaze wander. Where was his husband? Where was the person who had left a copy
of the *Blatt* lying on the table in front of him?

There! That could be him. Weigert stepped closer to make sure that the newspaper the man was reading was indeed the “Blatt”. Not a chance. It was the *Corriere della Sera*. He was just about to turn away when he spotted the familiar letters on the table in the far corner of the café: the front page of the newspaper he had worked for only a short while ago. But there was no time now to dwell on the past.

The green eyes of the man at the table looked both questioning and inviting. Weigert stepped closer. Having already noticed the American accent on the phone, he addressed him in English.

“Excuse me, but are you waiting here for Hans Weigert?”

Thomas Beckett held out his hand to him. Weigert took it hesitantly. Rarely had he felt so uncertain.

“Please, take a seat, Mr Weigert. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“May I suggest we spare ourselves such formalities and get straight to the point?”

“Wouldn’t you like to order a drink first?”

Beckett didn’t even wait for an answer, but waved the plump woman at the bar over.

As she squeezed her way between the tables, Weigert sized up the man opposite her. The elegant grey suit had probably cost as much as Weigert had been earning a month just a short while ago. His hands were slender and well-groomed. On one finger sat a small, inconspicuous ring, which was slightly wider in one place. Engraved there was a small pyramid, which did not taper to a point at its top, but
ended in a straight line. Above it, a small triangle was visible. The cheap-looking glasses stood in a strange contrast to the expensive suit. A small moustache sat above his mouth. Otherwise, his face was clean-shaven.

The light blond hair was a little tousled, probably due to the wind outside.

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Weigert had no idea that Beckett did not normally wear a moustache. Nor did he know that his real hair colour was brown. Nor that he didn't need glasses. Beckett had preferred to alter his appearance with the help of a make-up artist from the UN secret service. As a successful businessman, he was, after all, not entirely unknown, even if he shunned the numerous social obligations that largely stripped him of the privileges that came with his position. For a journalist like Hans Weigert, however, it would still be possible to uncover his identity with the help of some archives. That was why Beckett had been happy to make use of the services of the World Intelligence Service.

"Signori?"

The landlady had finished her obstacle course and reached them. Weigert mustered the few words of Italian he knew and ordered a cappuccino. Then he turned to Beckett.

"Who are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"So you prefer to remain anonymous?"

“Exactly. I don’t think it makes much difference whether you know my name or not.”

“Very well, as you wish.”

Weigert took his cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one. The plump woman placed the cappuccino on the table in front of him. On the white cream topping were a few dark specks.

Chocolate sprinkles. Weigert’s unease had still not subsided. He decided to start by taking on the cream, to show that he wasn’t in too much of a hurry.

After all, it was he who had something to offer that the other man was interested in. Perhaps his counterpart would make the first move. Just as he was about to put the second spoonful of cream into his mouth, the moment arrived.

“You’ve made great progress with your research, Mr Weigert.”

Had that been a question or a statement? Weigert set the spoon aside and took a drag on his cigarette.

“Further than you were prepared to let me.”

“As a journalist, you should know that sometimes it’s better not to write about something. After all, your profession requires not only certain other skills but also a fair amount of sense of responsibility.”

“And so you want to decide who is allowed to write what and when?”

“No, of course not. But...”

"Don’t talk nonsense. With Volker’s murder, they were trying to cover something up. They wanted to pin the two murders in Wewelsburg on me because they were afraid I’d dig deeper in my investigations than some people would like. And now they’re trying to lure me in: no charges,

back to my newspaper, but in return I must keep quiet. And behind all this are you and your people!"

"Whoever may be behind it, it doesn't alter the responsibility you have as a journalist."

"Responsibility for what? For ensuring no one finds out that the ghosts of Agarthi are alive again? For keeping what Shambhala is doing in the dark?"

Weigert was slowly getting into his stride. Outwardly, Beckett showed no signs of impatience or nervousness. Inside, however, he was on edge. Fate... Agarthi had snatched it from Shambhala.

"How on earth do you know about Agarthi and Shambhala?"

Weigert thought it over. Should he tell them about his conversation with Steiner
? But then the UN secret service would snap him up.
An important source of information, one that might need to be called upon again, would be lost. So no.

"I just know. Let's go back: responsibility for what?"

"There are things people cannot comprehend. It would simply overwhelm them. If you were to take away all their previous points of reference, the things they've used to situate themselves in life and in history, the consequences would be almost impossible to foresee.

Do you really want to tell anyone that the threads of politics are woven elsewhere than people believe? What do you think would happen if you, Weigert, could prove to the public that men like me or Bernhard Volker are committed exclusively to the ideas of Shambhala? And what would happen, let's suppose, if you could prove that for hundreds or thousands of prominent figures around the world? Demonstrations,
unrest, uprisings, perhaps even wars would be the result. No one could believe any longer in what had hitherto been sacred to them. What good would that do humanity? They would not understand, after all, that a
that such guidance is in their best interests. And what would you gain from it, Mr Weigert?

Or is that what you want?"

What had Steiner said? Those who followed the path to the left sought to bestow the breath of the divine upon mankind. And those who shadowed the path to the right sought to be worshipped as gods. Agarthi and Shamballa. That was the difference.
Weigert recalled Steiner's words. Until now, he hadn't been able to make much of them, but slowly the fog was beginning to lift.

"I don't know if I want that. But I want to tell the truth, and the whole truth."

Beckett leaned back and took a sip from the glass in front of him.

"The truth? What truth? Your truth? The truth of the woman over there behind the bar?

The truth of the workers sitting over there? Or my truth? The real truth, Weigert, is not something just anyone can grasp. If you could explain to people in a convincing way that 'God is dead', that would come as a shock to many. But if you

that God is alive, and right there amongst them, then the shock is even greater.”

“And you’re God, or what?”

Beckett had to smile. Little wrinkles formed around his eyes. It lasted only a moment, then he became serious again. He reached into his jacket and produced his wallet. With pointed fingers, he pulled
a banknote. It was a one-dollar bill. “Are you

planning to pay already?”

"Oh, no. Our conversation has only just begun. I just want to show you something."

He placed the dollar bill on the table, face down. Then he slid it over to Weigert.

“That’s God.”

Weigert looked at the banknote, then at Beckett.

“If you’re trying to say that people today only worship money, then surely…”

“No, no. That would be too simple. But God leaves traces.” “On a dollar

bill?”

“So to speak. Do you see the pyramid?”

Only now did Weigert realise that it was the same one engraved on his counterpart’s ring.

"And? What about her?"

"At the very bottom you’ll find a date: 1776."

“No wonder—that was the year the US declared its independence.”

"That too. Now add up the digits of that number." Weigert felt

he was being taken for a ride. But he did the maths.

"21."

“Very good. 21, which is three times the sacred number seven.”

"So what? Are you trying to prove to me that the seven dwarfs exist?" Beckett

ignored Weigert’s cynicism.

“Now count the steps of the pyramid above the plinth bearing the year.”

Weigert counted.

“Twelve.”

“Exactly. The number of perfect communion rising above the base. The twelve apostles, the twelve Knights of the Round Table, whatever.”

“Listen, what’s all this about?”

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"Think of it as a little game. What's above the pyramid?"

"Are you taking the mickey? A glowing triangle with an eye in it. No idea what that's doing there."

"Oh, it is the Eye of God, which sees all, the good and the bad alike.
It stands above the twelve levels. It is, so to speak, the highest level, which leads the lower twelve and what lies beneath them. Thirteen levels in total, the second sacred number, twelve plus one."

At first, Weigert thought he'd come across a madman. But then he had to think back to Tibet and Steiner. There were more of that sort than he'd thought. What had Steiner said? You see the cauldron, but not the hand that holds and moves it. Now he saw a dollar bill.

Were the symbols on it signs of the power behind it?

"Right then, Mr Weigert, now count the leaves on the olive branch that the eagle is holding in its talons over there on the right."

Weigert counted again. He muttered the result under his breath.

"13."

"And now count the arrows the eagle is holding in its other talons."

One more time, Weigert vowed to himself. Then he wouldn't count

anything else. "13."

"Now count the stars above the eagle."

"I can save myself the trouble. I suppose the answer is 13 again, isn't it?"

"Exactly."

Weigert rummaged through his knowledge of history. Wait a moment...

"None of this really surprises me. After all, the USA was founded by 13 states."

"Yes, that too. And with that, a new era began. By the way, have you read the inscription beneath the pyramid?"

He had.

"Novus Ordo Seclorum. If my modest knowledge of Latin serves me right, I'd say: A New World Order."

"You've hit the nail on the head. Now, if you turn the note over..."

Weigert followed the suggestion.

"...you'll see a picture of George Washington, the first president of my country."

Washington was initiated into the Fredericksburg Lodge in Virginia in 1752. In 1788, a year before his election as President, he became Worshipful Master of the Alexandria Lodge. And like every American President after him, he too took his oath of office on the Bible. In Washington's case, this Bible belonged to St John's Lodge No. 1."

Slowly, Weigert began to understand.

"Freemasons? Shambhala?"

"Call it what you will. The words are not the things.

Incidentally, on the Treasury Department's seal, next to the portrait of Washington, you can see beneath the square—which, incidentally, is a Masonic symbol, a key. It is the Key of Solomon. It commands secrecy."

A quick glance, then Weigert pushed the banknote back across the table, as if he could simply push Shamballa and its traces away with it. Beckett put it back in his wallet.

"Do you know now what God is?"

Weigert didn't know, but he suspected that things were rarely as one imagined them to be.

Like Steiner, the man on the other side of the table was also a wanderer between two worlds. They were all trying to let Weigert glimpse the other world. Yet at the same time, they made it clear to him that he would never be able to understand it. They might be right. But here, in this world, they could not take his home away from him. Could they really not? Or had they not long since left their mark here too?

"You've suddenly become so quiet. Did you not like my little number game? You did want to find out more about Shambhala, didn't you?"

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"With all due respect, but a dollar bill seems a rather unusual choice for that."

"I think that was a good example. Think back to the pyramid. Twelve layers stacked one on top of the other watch over the base. And divine power guides them.

Do you understand now what it means to have responsibility?"

"By responsibility over the base, as you call it, do you mean power over people?"

"The word 'power' has such a negative ring to it in your voice. But aren't those who see deeper virtually obliged to take the lead
? Not for their own sake, but for the benefit of humanity. That is the responsibility I meant."

Beckett leaned forward. He spoke now very quietly and earnestly. "You could

share in that responsibility, Mr Weigert."

So that's where the wind was blowing from.

"You mean… me and Schamballah?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. You would be in the best of company."

"People like Eurofed President Bernhard Volker, UN Security Council member Alan Greenspan, or Russian Minister of Economic Development Oleg Garakin?"

That last name had hit home. Astonishment was written all over Beckett's face.

"You know about Garakin?"

One-nil to me, thought Weigert.

"Yes. I've done my homework."

Beckett had regained his composure. This journalist was more dangerous than he'd assumed. But if he couldn't beat him, then he'd simply have to win him over.

"I suppose you've also added the results of your research to that mysterious list you mentioned?"

Damn! He hadn’t thought of the most obvious thing! But he would make up for it as soon as possible.

But he couldn’t let his opponent know that. Now was the time to bluff.

"Of course I have. And I can assure you, my research was very thorough."

Beckett thought for a moment. If Weigert was telling the truth, then he had amassed a great deal of explosive material. The impact of it would be equivalent to that of an atomic bomb if the material fell into the wrong hands. The journalist did not yet seem to fully grasp the significance of what he had stumbled upon, but he would not let it go until he had got to the bottom of it. That much was clear. Weigert had to be neutralised. But how? Arrest him? And what if he’d handed his documents over to someone to publish them if Weigert didn’t get in touch again by a certain date by a certain date? Or had he come up with some other plan? After all, he had said himself that his arrest would make no sense. It might be an opportunity, but the risk would be far greater. Perhaps he could persuade Weigert to hand over the results of his research after all.

"What about this list? Why won’t you hand it over to the UN intelligence service? Or are you unaware that the world owes the Third Reich to the men of Agarthi? And now those same people are once again reaching for power. Garakin, Volker and Greenspan: three cowardly assassinations of outstanding figures. Carried out in a spirit we had believed dead for decades.
Do you really want this nightmare to go on unchecked?"

“I have been informed about the connection between the Third Reich and Agarthi. But I’m not quite sure whether I should believe all of it.”

"I don’t know what you’ve heard or from whom. But since you seem at least to be aware of the significance of the Thule Society,

I am inclined to believe that you have been correctly informed. There are not many people who know the whole truth."

Now this man was actually talking about the Thule Society too. With Steiner, it had somehow been understandable, but slowly it seemed to be becoming common knowledge. Yet had he, Hans Weigert, ever seriously doubted since his trip to Tibet that it might not have been the case?

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“What is it? Do you really want Agarthi to be brought back to life? Help us put an end to this nightmare! Or you will have political upheavals on your conscience that you will never be able to account for.”

Weigert stubbed out his cigarette and tilted his head slightly to one side.

“So you want me to join Shambhala. But at the same time you’re telling me I could never understand this other world. How does that work?”

“You would learn. Not everyone can simply come to us. We approach those whom we believe can contribute to the realisation of Shamballa’s vision. And You could do that. You would be admitted to one of the lodges and initiated. And you would work on yourself to ascend the rungs of

, so to speak, treading the path from the human to the divine. Slowly, you would come to understand. You would be part of a community that guides humanity towards the better. Towards peace, humanity and tolerance. This community is more influential than you can imagine. I hear your boss is due to retire in a few years. A newspaper like the ‘Blatt’
could certainly do with someone at its helm who is committed to the values of Shamballa. All the better if that man were to come from the ranks of the newspaper itself.”

“Wait a moment! Does that mean Bergmann is on your side too?”

“Whoever belongs to Schamballah may, at best, admit it to himself. He must remain silent about his brothers in the presence of profane people. Everyone who joins our ranks must take this oath.”

“And he must surely also keep silent about the dirty business you and your comrades are up to?”

“About the murders committed in the name of Schamballah, about the influence the brothers exert on politics, about the posts and businesses they hand out to one another? What about the murders of Pierre Martin and his wife? Or the P-2 scandal!? Is this what the realisation of your noble ideals of humanity and tolerance looks like?”

Weigert had had enough. The only difference between the man and Steiner was the greater cynicism of his opponent. But his interlocutor probably didn’t even notice it. He was simply convinced that a small circle of descendants of the gods had to lead the foolish
masses of humanity. In his own way, he was entirely consistent.

The fan in the secret service vehicle, disguised as a bakery delivery van, had broken down.

Nor could the auxiliary heating be adjusted as Roper and Gillis would have liked. It was 27 degrees in the van and the air was thick with smoke as a result of the two men’s excessive cigarette consumption.

"I really need to cool off and get some fresh air. It’s unbearable in here."

Gillis stood up and put on his work coat, which was hanging on a hook by the rear door.

It too bore the bakery’s logo, which adorned the vehicle’s outer wall. They certainly were thorough at the World Intelligence Service.

"OK. I’ll stay here in the meantime. Those two in there will be chatting away for a while anyway. And in the end, it’ll all have been pointless. You’ll see, we won’t be allowed to arrest this Weigert
."

“I don’t care. The main thing is, I’ll get to bed earlier today than I have in the last few days.”

"Don’t forget to pretend we’ve got something to unload here. Take a basket of bread rolls and go into any house. You can just tip the rolls into the bin so you come out with the empty basket
."

Gillis gave his colleague a grumpy look.

“Do you think I’ve only just joined the club? I’ve already sat my arse sore on jobs like this back when you were still with the bobbies in London.”

“All right, all right. Don’t stay too long. I want to get out of this sauna myself.”

Gillis opened the tailgate and got out. He grabbed a bin, set it on the street and slammed the door shut. Slowly
he strolled towards a building entrance about twenty metres from their car. Relieved, he breathed in the cool, fresh air.

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As he tried to avoid a dog that was sniffing at his shoes, he bumped into a man. He glanced briefly at the small Italian. With a muttered “Scusi”, he squeezed past and continued on his way slowly.

Stefano Lorenzo watched Gillis for just a moment. Then he turned round, and his gaze swept once more over the cars parked at the roadside. A few metres further on, he suddenly spotted the dark blue Mercedes. No more than a couple of months old, he estimated. And the top-of-the-range model in that series, to boot. With deliberate steps,

as if he were out window-shopping, he walked on. When he was level with the car on the pavement, he realised that someone was sitting at the wheel. A woman. She seemed to be waiting for someone. The ignition key was in the lock. Lorenzo strolled past and glanced left into the windows of a café.

It could work. He just had to open the door and pretend he wanted to ask the woman something. Then, in a flash, grab her, drag her out of the car, jump in and lock the door. Start the engine and drive off.

A matter of five to ten seconds. He rarely stole cars, though
That was his usual way of doing things, but in this case the risk-reward ratio seemed perfectly reasonable to him. His fence would pay at least 20,000 ECU for this luxury car.

Lorenzo stopped in front of a shoe shop window and glanced cautiously to the side. The pavement was quite busy. If the woman in the car screamed when he dragged her out, people would assume at first

she was having an argument with her husband. And by the time the first people realised what was going on, he would already be long gone. He had no doubt. It would work.

Beckett sat up straight. His expression was serious. Weigert wasn't so easy to break. He actually seemed inspired by a naive idealism to drag the truth into the light and thus make it accessible to the many who wouldn't be able to understand it anyway. Not even the mention of Bergmann's vacant post had tempted him.

"What you accuse us of, Mr Weigert, may well be true. But I believe you are misjudging the situation. We must act as we do because we have to defend ourselves against those who attack our path towards humanity and tolerance. And that path is in grave danger."

"Let us assume for a moment that the list of Agarthian sleeper agents in my possession is complete. Do you really believe that 666 people are capable of achieving anything beyond a few political assassinations
?"

Beckett was startled. What!? 666!? If Weigert really was in possession of an authentic list, then Agarthi was more alive than

Beckett had ever thought possible. And Shambhala knew just a dozen of his opponents. That damned journalist had to hand over the list.

"You're naive, Weigert. These aren't just any 666 people. These are men with abilities you can only dream of. And these men cannot be bought off with money or entire divisions. But apart from that, since last night Agarthi has had something infinitely more valuable than these men. Something that gives them the capacity for real power in the first place."

Trevor Gillis emptied the contents of the basket into one of the large bins standing in the hallway.

He set the basket down and did a few squats. Then he rotated his arms in circles, and finally walked a few steps on the spot. He picked up the basket again and stepped through the large wooden gate onto the pavement, which was brightly lit by numerous street lamps and the light streaming from shop windows and cafés.

Gillis's profession had taught him to notice even the smallest details and pay attention to them.

Although the vast majority of these turned out to be insignificant later on, it had already happened twice that his
above-average professional alertness had saved his life.

There, up ahead, he actually saw the small, black-haired man coming towards him – the one he'd bumped into two minutes earlier.

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But he had gone in the other direction. So he must have turned around a few steps past the café that was the target of the surveillance.

Gillis wondered whether he should arrange for the man to be tailed from the delivery van. But that would require at least two of the eight agents deployed to be withdrawn. If the whole thing turned out to be a dud and, at the same time, the possible arrest of Weigert and his girlfriend became more complicated, he could get into trouble.

Wait a minute! What was that? The man stopped in front of the Mercedes in which Weigert's girlfriend was sitting. He signalled something to her. Now she opened the door. Gillis quickened his pace to reach the van and his colleagues more quickly. There were about fifteen metres between him and the Mercedes, and a good dozen passers-by on the pavement.

Suddenly, the man thrust his arm into the car and grabbed the woman. Gillis dropped the basket and leapt onto the bonnet of a parked car. At the same time, his hand slipped under his work coat, clasped the Ingram and yanked it from its holster. From the bonnet, he could aim at his target over the heads of the passers-by. As he landed on the car, he had the small Submachine gun already at the ready. Not even a second had passed between the basket being dropped and his index finger curling. By the time Stefano Lorenzo yanked Claudia out of the car, it was already too late to stop the bullets.

"How lovely. And what is this thing that grants the ability to wield true power?"

Weigert was slowly growing impatient. He had now been talking to his unknown counterpart for twenty minutes. And he still hadn't got round to asking the questions he had actually wanted to ask.

"You come from Vienna, Mr Weigert. Until last night, there lay in the Hofburg an artefact that has not only made history, but is history itself. It is commonly known as the Holy Lance. But for us, the initiates of Shambhala and Agarthi, it is the Spear of Destiny. The Roman legionary Longinus once thrust this spear into the body of Jesus. And since that moment, the spear has been sacred. It, a chalice and the crown of thorns are the only objects that have ever come into contact with the blood of Jesus Christ. The chalice, better known as the Holy Grail, and the crown of thorns have been lost. The spear is here. Whoever possesses it possesses the power, for good or for evil. We believed that no one stood a chance of breaking into the treasury. Yet Agarthi has taken the spear, just as they did decades ago. You, Weigert, could help us find it again and thus prevent the awakening of Agarthi. If..."

“Wait a moment! I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. What…”

Weigert spun round when he heard the shots ringing out outside. His pupils dilated. He took it all in as if in slow motion. Outside the café, he saw Claudia’s body being shaken by the impact of the bullets. She collided with a man who was holding her by the hand. A shot struck Claudia in the back of the head. The bullet pierced the top of her skull, bored its way through her brain and exited just above her eye, finally lodging in the neck of the small man, whom Weigert had never seen before. Cascades of blood instantly spurted from his wound. The artery had been hit. Claudia collapsed to the ground.

Her body twisted as she fell and struck the concrete pavement on her side. The man she had collided with slid – with the open car door behind him – to the ground and ended up half-lying on top of Claudia.

The three workers a few tables away, who had been engrossed in their card game just moments before, had jumped to their feet at the sound of the gunshots. Suddenly, each of them was holding a pistol. Two rushed towards the door. The third seemed indecisive at first, then turned to face Beckett and Weigert.

What had unfolded in a matter of seconds seemed to Weigert as though it had lasted minutes.

Claudia and the stranger, who was half-lying on top of her, were dead. That was the realisation that registered in Weigert’s subconscious. He and Beckett had also jumped to their feet. Weigert’s eyes betrayed nothing but boundless rage and despair as Beckett looked at him. Weigert drove a fist into his chest. The man cried out, staggered backwards and fell over an armchair. But Weigert took no notice of any of it
any of it.

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He had leapt towards the door leading to the toilets. The third of the card players was trying to force his way through the chaos that had engulfed the café. Weigert ran along the corridor to the toilets, heading for a door that appeared to lead outside. Suddenly it was flung open and a man burst in, a pistol at the ready.

Weigert's reactions, with his thinking shut down, unfolded exactly as a Japanese man had drilled into him years earlier. As he ran , he leapt up, drew his left leg in and thrust his right leg forward with all his might. At the same time, he let out a piercing scream, in which resonating with his pent-up rage and boundless despair. The heel struck the man's face with full force. At the same moment, a shot rang out from the man's gun. Both men fell to the ground. The man was badly hit by the kick; Weigert fell because he had lost his balance.
The bullet had struck the wall behind him.

He scrambled to his feet, leapt over the body lying there as if lifeless, and rushed through the door. The secret service agent, disguised as a worker, aborted the chase when he saw his colleague. Blood was oozing from his nose and mouth. His jaw was twisted in a strange way.

Meanwhile, Weigert pulled himself up with a pull-up on the wall enclosing the courtyard and dropped into the darkness on the other side.
He started running. His tears mingled with the raindrops and ran down his face. All bridges had been burned. There was no turning back now.

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Rome, 20 December

There was a knock three times. Villiger got up and went to

the door. “Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Hans. Open up!”

He opened the door. Weigert rushed in and collapsed into an armchair. The look on his face made it clear that something must have happened.

“What’s the matter with you? Has something gone

wrong?” “Claudia is dead.”

At first, Villiger said nothing for a few seconds. Then he pulled up the second armchair in the room and sat down.

“Say that again!”

Weigert took a deep breath. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. He paused repeatedly, and during those pauses the terrible events replayed themselves in his mind’s eye.

“They shot Claudia.....We went to the café
as agreed. She.....waited in the car outside. I
went in.... In there... in the café.”.....There was a man. We
chatted. And then. ....."

Weigert swallowed to clear the lump in his throat. It didn’t help. Then he continued.

"Suddenly shots rang out. ... I looked out of the window.....Outside on the street, someone was dragging Claudia out of the car. At that moment, she was hit....."

Villiger jumped up and pushed the armchair aside with a forceful sweep of his arm.

"Those arseholes!"

Villiger began pacing up and down. To the door leading into the corridor, then turning around and back again. When he reached the door for the second time and turned around, he ground out the words he'd used before, clenching his teeth. His voice was filled with helpless rage.

"Those arseholes!"

Weigert wanted to say something, but he wasn't quite sure what. Villiger stopped and looked at him. Anger blazed in his eyes.

"Why on earth didn't they nab you?" There was a hint of

reproach in his tone.

"Honestly, Peter. There was nothing more I could do for Claudia. She's… She's been hit a few times."

"At least four or five shots... One of them... to the head..." As Villiger walked

over to the bed, on which a briefcase lay, he asked, "Who was it? One of the

UN people?"

He opened the briefcase, reached inside and took out a pistol and a loaded magazine. He jerked the magazine into the gun and chambered a round.

Weigert stood up and walked slowly towards his friend.

"What are you planning to do with that thing? Whatever you do, you can't bring her back to life!"

He placed his hand on Villiger's shoulder. Villiger's body trembled slightly.

“So, who was it?”

Weigert sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I don’t know. Honestly. The shots came from a spot I couldn’t see from the café."

Villiger looked thoughtfully at the gun he was holding. Then he carefully put it back in the briefcase and sat down next to Weigert.

“What did you do after it happened?”

“I ran off. I don’t know why. It was like I was in a trance.” “Did they try to

catch you?”

“Yes.”

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Weigert’s thoughts returned to the three supposed workers who had suddenly found themselves holding pistols. And then the man in the corridor leading to the toilets. The scream. The leap. The shot. The police cordons in the streets, which he had dodged as he ran through the city.

Then his phone call with Livio Lucentini, from whom he'd learnt where to find Villiger.

"So you were quicker." "I

was lucky."

"That means they wanted to kill you too. And if they find out I'm in on it as well, I'll be next."

Weigert stared at the pattern of the cheap fitted carpet on the floor. "Probably."

"Agarthi or Shambhala?" "What

do you mean by that?"

"I mean, who wants to kill us. Agarthi or Shambhala?" "I don't know. But

does it make any difference?"

"Hardly."

Once again, an oppressive silence hung between the two men for a few moments. All that could be heard was the noise of traffic drifting up from the street. Villiger rose from the bed and went into the bathroom. He returned with two glasses. He placed them on the small table standing in a corner of the room, next to the whisky bottle that had already found its place there. He poured some whisky and handed one of the glasses to Weigert. Then he sat down on the bed again. Both took a sip.

"Are you sure she's dead?"

Villiger looked questioningly at his friend. Weigert did not return his gaze.

"Yes."

“Shit.”

Silence again. Villiger lit a cigarette. Then came the next question.

“What now?”

“What else? We’re giving up. That means you’ll have to make sure you get back to Norway. They probably don’t know anything about you yet. And I’m going to the UN intelligence service.”

Villiger took a deep drag on his cigarette.

“And that’s why you ran off? So you could turn yourself in?”

“Damn it, Peter, we’ve lost control of this! If we carry on, we might all end up dead!”

“And if we don’t carry on? What then? Do you want to just forget everything we’ve found out? Do you want to pretend it never happened? Agarthi, Shambhala, Steiner, Wewelsburg, Martin, his wife, Volker, Greenspan, Garakin, the sleepers and who knows what else? Do you want to give up now!?”

Weigert stood up without a word to refill his empty glass. Villiger followed him, grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him round.

"If you do that, Hans, then our friendship is over. Claudia won’t come back to life if we carry on. But we have a duty to her. And with this bloody story, we’ve taken on a responsibility, for God’s sake! And no one can take that off our hands!"

Responsibility...? Hadn’t the man in the *café* used the same words to him as Villiger was now?

"Strange. That’s what the man in the café said too." Villiger was

irritated.

“What?”

“The bit about responsibility.”

“What else did he actually say? Who was he anyway?”

“I don’t know who it was. He wouldn’t tell me. He didn’t actually say all that much, at least nothing of significance. The shooting got in the way. He showed me a dollar bill...”

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"What was that for?"

"He wanted to show me that God leaves his mark." "Have you

completely lost your mind?"

"Why?"

"What’s God doing on a dollar bill?"

"Did I say God? I meant Shambhala." "And?"

"Well, just before the shots were fired, he mentioned a symbol that’s supposedly of immense significance because it came into contact with the blood of Jesus Christ. At least, these esotericists clearly attach great importance to it. Whoever possesses it

possesses it, possesses the power, for good or for evil. At least, that's what the man claimed."

"What sort of symbol was it?"

"Some sort of spear that's supposedly kept in the Hofburg. Or rather, was kept there. The men from Agarthi are said to have stolen it last night."

"In Vienna?"

"Yes."

Villiger slammed the glass down on the table and strode quickly over to the bed.

Next to the briefcase stood a travel bag. He opened it and began rummaging through it. Suddenly he pulled a newspaper out of the bag and threw it at Weigert. He caught it.

"What am I supposed to do

with this?" "Read it.

There's your spear."

Weigert unfolded the newspaper and examined it more closely. It was the evening edition of the

"International Herald Tribune", which must have come off the press just a few hours earlier. He didn't have to look far. The story was on the front page. A note at the end of the article referred to a further report on page three. He began to read.

All he could glean from the text on page one was a more or less accurate description of the events the man in the café had already hinted at. Last night, unknown perpetrators had broken into the heavily secured treasury of the Vienna Hofburg.

How they had done so remained a mystery. There were no clues. It was remarkable that what was one of the greatest art thefts in

It could have been a major incident, but it ended very mildly. Only one item had been stolen. This was the so-called Holy Lance, which formed part of the Habsburg regalia. Not even
from the display case that the perpetrators had opened to remove the lance was anything other than this single item. Consequently, there was much speculation about the perpetrators' motives.

Before Weigert turned to page three, he lit a cigarette. Then he read on.

The cigarette burned through the newspaper.

The second article was an outline of the history of the Holy Lance and its significance for the Habsburg Monarchy. Not particularly interesting in itself, were it not for a single sentence that caught Weigert's attention: "Following Austria's annexation by the German Reich in 1938, the Holy Lance, along with other items from the treasury, was taken to Germany, where it was recovered by American troops at the end of the war."

What had the man in the café called this piece of history? The "Spear of Destiny".

Had there been a struggle over destiny before? Agarthi, the Thule Society, the Third Reich – and the Spear. And Shambhala. Just as decades earlier... Now it dawned on Weigert what the man in the café had meant by that.

Villiger had remained silent the whole time. When he saw that Weigert had put the newspaper aside, he glanced at his wristwatch. It was two minutes to midnight. He broke the silence.

"In two minutes, 21 December begins. Steiner told you that in a few days' time, Agarthi will seize power. Until now, we haven't known what will happen then. We still don't know. But if what that bloke in the café told you is true—that Agarthi is behind this robbery—then it has something to do with it. Perhaps

the robbery was what Steiner meant. If these people really believe in the power of the spear, then we've got a lot to look forward to.

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Now they have the symbol of power. They'll come and take the power itself. We can't give up, Hans! Not now, when it all comes down to the wire!"

"And what are we supposed to do? We have no idea what will happen or where. And we don't even know for sure if anything will happen at all, or if the theft of the spear was the end of it!"

"Think carefully once more about what Steiner told you! Perhaps we've overlooked something."

Weigert stood up and went to the window. The Spear of Destiny… Could a simple object change the course of history? Could it really be destiny? Not in this world. But Agarthi and Shambhala belonged to another. Did the spear possess power there? If so, then surely its powers also extended into his, Weigert's, world via Agarthi and Shambhala. But wasn't it enough that a few madmen believed in it, especially when these madmen clearly wielded considerable influence? Were they mad at all? Or were they, at least in principle, merely doing things that every other believer did? Did the Marian apparitions in Lourdes hold power? Or the
Kaaba with the black piece of meteorite in Mecca? Or did they only gain their power through the people who believed in them? But perhaps there was a truth behind them that was more powerful than anything else. Why not behind the spear as well?

Weigert looked out of the window. Five storeys below him, past the hotel, the night traffic of Rome flowed by. The clouds that had brought the drizzle had cleared. The sky was now clear. Despite the brightness emanating from the city, one could make out the stars, at least the very brightest among them. And between them, dominating the sky, hung the round, dirty-yellow disc of the full moon.

The full moon. For millions upon millions of years it had returned with a precision that had fascinated humans ever since their appearance on Earth. Just like the sun.

The full moon... Martin... Wewelsburg Castle... The Walhalla! Was that the connection he was looking for? What had Martin said? Every few years, when the winter solstice coincided with the full moon, the moonlight fell precisely through the opening in the wall into that vault which had once served the SS

as a place of worship. And tomorrow – Weigert glanced at his watch – no, today, was the winter solstice.

Agarthi... Steiner... The Spear... Wewelsburg. The event Steiner had spoken of must take place there! In the presence of the Spear! And with the men of Agarthi! That was it.

And that was the only place where history could be stopped.

Weigert turned abruptly.

“Yes, Peter. We can do something. We’re going to Wewelsburg!”

Villiger quickly understood.

“So you mean Agarthi is taking the spear there?”

“I suppose so. Martin told me that in that vaulted cellar—you know the one—moonlight streams in through an opening every few years at full moon. And apparently the SS used to hold some sort of rituals in that room.”

Villiger whistled through his teeth.

“Of course! Steiner told you that he was initiated at Wewelsburg, didn’t he! And it’s mentioned on Martin’s CDs as well. That could be it.”

He paused briefly, looked down at the floor, then back at Weigert. “We can’t

bring Claudia back to life. But we can
at least fulfil our duty. We owe her that. Let’s go.”

“Did you get everything from Lucentini?”

"Yes. Two pistols and the fake papers. Today I hired a car using my fake ID. It’s parked downstairs. All you need to do now is make sure your appearance matches the photo in your passport again. Because after what happened in Piazza Navona, your mugshot will have been sent to every cop in Europe by now."

“There’s still something we need to do. Nobody knows what awaits us at Wewelsburg. Perhaps nothing at all. Perhaps Agarthi. Perhaps a large contingent of the UN secret service. Whatever the case.

We must take precautions to ensure that everything we’ve discovered over the last few weeks is preserved, should anything happen to us.”

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“How do you intend to do that? The two CDs with the sleeper list are in a bank safe. I’ve got the key with me. But what about everything else?”

“Hillgruber.”

“You want to tell your head of department everything?”

“I’ll write it all down and send it to him. Do you still have the printout of the list from the CDs?”

"Yes. I was just about to shred the stuff and flush it down the toilet, as we agreed. What are you planning to do with it?"

“We’ll send the list to Hillgruber as well.” “Do you really think he can be trusted?” “I hope so. Time is running out. What choice do we have?” “Then get on with it. I’ll try to get some more sleep in the meantime. If I can manage it at all…”

Weigert sat down at the table and began to write. First, a personal letter to Hillgruber.

Then he recounted in detail on paper the events of the past few weeks. When he reached the point where Claudia
, he had to fight back the tears. With great effort, he forced out the final lines. Then he took the written pages and put them, together with the printout of the sleeper list, into a large envelope. Two dozen sheets of paper were now their only defence against an enemy that seemed overwhelmingly powerful.

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Rome, 20 December

“How could this have happened, Thomas?”

Kipling was so agitated that his voice cracked. The sweat was beading on his forehead even more than usual. And there was no handkerchief to wipe it away.

“It was just bad luck, combined with a trigger-happy secret service agent.”

Olaf Carlsson wasn’t going to let that pass. His voice grew so loud that it could still be heard out in the corridor of the UN intelligence branch in Rome.

“What else was Gillis supposed to do? Perhaps nothing!?”

Beckett, too, now raised his voice.

“Why did that madman have to shoot straight away!? Do you only employ gunslingers who know how to handle a gun better than their brains!?”

Kipling burst in.

“Why did he even get into a situation where he had to shoot?”

Beckett’d had enough. He left the explanations to Carlsson.

“Claudia Apollonio was waiting for Weigert in the car outside the café. As far as we’ve been able to establish so far, a car thief tried to drag her out and steal the car. One of our men then fired at the man and hit Apollonio in the process.”

Kipling wasn’t satisfied with that explanation. “Are

you sure Agarthi isn’t behind this?” “Pretty sure.”

“Why?”

“Firstly, the man could be identified. He has been arrested several times in the past for car theft and other offences. Although they’ve rarely been able to pin anything on him, everything suggests he’s just a small-time crook. And secondly, if Agarthi had been behind the operation, it wouldn’t have gone down like this. Then the journalist and probably Mr Becken too would have been killed in the process. No, Agarthi isn’t behind this. It was just bad luck.”

Thomas Beckett had settled into a chair and was sipping coffee from a paper cup.

He was a little calmer now.

“Joe, did you at least get anything out of that Agnelli? Does he know anything about the spear? Or about Agarthi?”

Kipling let his massive body sink into an armchair.

"Agnelli, of course. We interrogated him. At first he kept quiet and wouldn’t say a word. Then the UN people got a bit rough. But he tried..."

"Spare me the details! I want to know the results."

“Right. There’s bad news and good news. He knows no more about the spear than we do. He has no idea where it is or what’s to be done with it. The good news is that he let slip when Agarthi will launch the offensive. And that is...”

Kipling glanced at his watch. It was two minutes to midnight.

“That’s practically today, 21 December. The winter solstice – we really should have guessed.”

“After I heard about the spear being stolen last night, I almost suspected as much. Did Agnelli at least say what would happen or where?”

Kipling had spotted a napkin, which he used to dab his forehead.

"No. Since the drug we gave him is working a treat, there's only one conclusion: he doesn't know himself. Either he wasn't supposed to take part in the operation, or he should have been informed."

"Have you at least arranged for his house, his office and his flats to be under surveillance and for the phones to be tapped?"

Carlsson intervened again.

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"Of course we have. You must think we're complete amateurs!"

"I didn't say that. What else did Agnelli know about Agarthi?"

"Hardly anything that would help us. As for the number of sleeper agents, he confirmed Weigert's figures. There really are 666, far more than we ever imagined.

It seems they're organised into cells. Five of them met twice a year at Agnelli's weekend house near Rome.
That..."

"We have, of course, placed this house under the strictest surveillance. A meeting may well be taking place there."

Olaf Carlsson wanted to show that his intelligence service was working perfectly well. Beckett simply ignored him.

“What else, Joe?”

“That’s actually it. We’ll continue the interrogation to gain further insight into the current organisational structures of Agarthi
. But for the moment, that was probably the most important thing.” “Did he

spill the names of a few sleeper agents?”

“Only the five who met regularly at his house. We already had two of them on our list. Surveillance of the remaining three, as well as everyone else we know of, has already been ordered.”

Carlsson took advantage of the pause Kipling made. He wanted to vent the anger that had built up over the last few days.

"Gentlemen, I must make one thing clear. The UN Secret Service is heavily involved in all operations against Agarthi. And I hate it when decisions concerning the Secret Service are made that I am merely left to carry out. I am the boss here, Mr Beckett!"

Beckett stood up to fetch a fresh cup of coffee from the machine. As the hot, black liquid flowed into the paper cup, he turned to Carlsson.

“May I remind you that upon joining your lodge, you also submitted to the hierarchy of Shambhala? I am well aware that you did not anticipate events such as those of the past few weeks. You thought Shambhala’s work was confined behind the doors of some lodges. And every now and then you supply us with a few dossiers to discredit certain people. But unfortunately,

that is not enough. We are all in this together, Carlsson. We are committed first and foremost to our ideas, and only then to our profession, are we not?”

Carlsson hesitated slightly before answering. By the time he did, he had clearly calmed down again.

"Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry. I was just a bit annoyed because the UN intelligence service – and by extension, myself – is being accused of not doing everything possible to bring this matter to a successful conclusion."

Beckett’s cup had run over. He walked back over to his armchair.

“No one has made any personal accusations against you. After all, it’s not your fault if one of your officials has a loose tongue. We can’t waste time arguing about mishaps now. 21 December has begun. We must stop Agarthi. Everything else is irrelevant now.”

“And how?”

Beckett looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. Then he slowly began to outline his strategy.

“They have the spear. That is the crucial point. The next step is the ritual that allows them to harness the spear’s powers. They will perform it tonight.

There’s no doubt about that.” “But

where, for God’s sake?”

Kipling was completely distraught because he’d run out of cigarettes.

"Yes, where? In principle, it could take place anywhere. But I’d be very much mistaken if Agarthi hadn’t chosen a specific location for it."

“Perhaps in Tibet? That’s what the information we’ve received from the Frenchman in Wewelsburg would suggest.”

Beckett shook his head.

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“No, I don’t think so. The spear was stolen last night. There wouldn’t be enough time to get it there.”

“And what about the most obvious choice, namely Vienna?”

“Possible. But it could just as easily have taken place at Wewelsburg.”

Now Carlsson spoke up.

“I don’t think we’re getting anywhere like this. I have another suggestion. We knew of eleven sleeper agents. Agnelli has revealed three more to us. That makes fourteen in total. Agnelli himself is out of the picture, as he’s got a few who is being held in a cell several floors below. That leaves 13. All 13 are already under surveillance. We could step up surveillance and hope that some of them will take part in the ritual. And they could then lead us there. In the meantime, we’ll stay in Rome. If the ceremony is to take place in Europe – and the short time between the theft of the spear and the ritual suggests this is the case – then we could be there in time with our people.”

Beckett set down his cup and nodded imperceptibly. “That’s it. Please make all the necessary arrangements.”

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21 December

Munich

The two large candles standing on the floor bathed the room in warm light. Between them stood the slender, naked body of a man. His eyes were fixed on the wall in front of him, where
the black sun was painted. His gaze was absorbed in the symbol, imagining an invisible connection between his body and the sun.

The man let his arms fall. He bowed his head so that his chin touched his chest. Then he slowly closed his eyes and began to breathe deeply and calmly. He concentrated on the air entering through his mouth, flowing down his windpipe and into his lungs.
As he exhaled, his mind followed the reverse path. For seven breaths.

Without opening his eyes, he carefully squatted down until his buttocks touched his lower legs. His heels were now slightly raised off the ground
. He placed his forearms on his thighs, palms facing downwards. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven deep breaths.

Then his lips parted and released soft sounds from his body into the freedom of the room.

First a drawn-out 'A', then, immediately afterwards as if in a single word, a hissing 'S'.

“Aaaasssss.”

There was a pause lasting a breath. Then came the next vowel, followed by an S.

"Eeeesssss."

Another breath-long pause, and then the I. He proceeded in the same way with the O. After the

"Uuuusssssss", the man let himself fall forward carefully, so that his knees touched the floor.

His eyes still closed, he raised his arms. The fingers of both hands interlaced to form the sign of light.

After another seven deep breaths, his arms sank back down onto his thighs. The man slowly opened his eyes, his gaze immediately fixing once more on the black sun.

Then he slowly sat up again, bowed slightly towards the mysterious symbol, and turned away.

Ludwig Meliert walked over to his bedroom without extinguishing the candles to get dressed.

When he had finished, he reached for his wristwatch and slipped it onto his wrist. It was 11.50 pm. In six to seven hours, he would be in Wewelsburg. Meliert locked the front door and took the lift down. He had parked his BMW one street over, as there had been no space left in front of the building where he lived. He started the engine and manoeuvred the car out of the parking space. Twenty metres behind him, on the other side of the street, an engine was also started. Meliert’s shadow set off in pursuit.

Rome

The large digital clock on the wall showed 3.47 pm. A tense calm prevailed in the room serving as the operations centre. Thirteen of the roughly two dozen telephones were manned by officers from the Rome branch of the World Intelligence Service. Each of them was the direct link to a surveillance team.

Carlsson and Beckett were sitting at a large, round conference table in the middle of the room, drinking coffee. Neither had slept for more than a few hours. Joe Kipling had retired to his room just half an hour earlier to lie down. He would not be there when Carlsson and Beckett set off. His task was to extract as much information as possible about Agarthi from Agnelli.

Carlsson had taken charge of the operation. The head of the UN intelligence branch in Rome had, as with the operation at the Piazza Navona, raised no objections. He had refrained from asking for further explanations
. No one would have given them to him anyway. After all, it was not uncommon for UN personnel to coordinate operations far from their actual base.

One of the telephones buzzed. The man sitting in front of it picked up the receiver.

“Operations Command.”

He listened for a moment, then hung up. The officer stood up and walked over to Carlsson’s table.

“The team in Munich has just reported that target number five is on the motorway heading towards Nuremberg.”

“Thanks.”

Carlsson turned to Beckett.

“So that’s the third one. What do you make of it?”

“Hard to say. The one in London is on his way to the airport Heathrow. There’s no flight booked under his name. But that doesn’t mean much. The man from Naples is driving to Rome. And now there’s that one too. The rest of our thirteen customers are either at home or in the office.”

“Or in bed with his girlfriend, like the one in Vienna.”

"Be that as it may. Only three have so far engaged in activity that could be of significance to us."

Carlsson looked at the digital map of Europe projected onto the wall by a computer. He zoomed in on Germany.

“The Munich–Nuremberg motorway… That could be the right direction if he’s heading for Wewelsburg.”

“It could be. It might not be. But if your people don’t lose track of him, we’ll know more soon enough. The one in London is causing me the greater concern at the moment. He’s heading to the airport, even though under his name "nothing has been booked."

"We’ll know about him soon too. At the latest when his plane takes off."

"We can only hope there’ll still be time to do something. What if, for example, he’s flying to the US?"

"If the ritual is to take place tonight, he wouldn’t make it in time. And if it is to go ahead in the US,

then I'll just have to ask my colleagues there for support."

"That would certainly not be in our interest. I've had enough of the few people who've picked up on the matter with Weigert and this Frenchman. The more people we involve, the more problems we could face. That means, first and foremost, you, Mr Carlsson. A lot of people might later ask themselves why we mobilised so many men. No, as long as it's at all possible, we'll try to handle the matter with your team without involving other authorities. No regular police, no other intelligence services, and as few UN personnel as possible. Or do you perhaps want the true reason for our operation to become public knowledge?"

"No, certainly not. But what about the people monitoring our 13 targets?"

"What's the big deal? They're just keeping an eye on suspects. They don't know what it's all about. To them, it's just another job like any other." "And if an operation is necessary?" "Then you'll just pull them out as soon as we're there." "But what if we can't get there in time? We do have the small jet at our disposal, and we'll be able to use helicopters as well, but all that's only of any use to us if the commotion takes place in Europe."

"At the moment, everything seems to point in that direction. The targets in the US and Japan are keeping a low profile for now. And I think it'll stay that way." "Well, we'll know more in an hour or two." Carlsson stood up to fetch some fresh coffee.

Zurich–Stuttgart motorway

The digital speedometer read 135. The clock next to it showed 4.03 pm. The road was dry again now. No snowfall was hindering their rapid progress any longer. Villiger stared out through the windscreen. Two hours earlier, he had dropped Weigert off at
the wheel. His eyes were bloodshot. Again and again, the

His eyelids drooped. Yet every time, he'd managed to open them straight away, just like that. But it was slowly time to get some sleep again.

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Weigert and Villiger had left Rome that very night. They had posted the envelope for Hillgruber that very morning. As far as possible police checks were concerned, the car was the safest means of transport for them. The UN secret service knew nothing of Villiger. And they knew even less of a Peter Riedl, who had presented his ID to a car hire company yesterday. The false papers that Lucentini had procured for them served their purpose perfectly. And Hans Weigert had dyed his hair blonde, just as he had on his flight to Tibet.

Weigert rolled over in the passenger seat and opened his eyes. "Where are

we?"

He sat up.

"Just outside Stuttgart."

There was silence for three or four minutes. Villiger broke the silence.

"What if we weren't mistaken and Agarthi really did bring the spear to Wewelsburg?"

"So what's the plan? We'll get the spear, as agreed." "And what do

we do if they stop us?"

Weigert still didn't understand the question.

“Of course they won’t hand over the spear willingly. It’s of immense significance to these people. What do you think?”

“Let me put it plainly: have you realised yet that they might kill us in the process? If the Agarthians are prepared to kill high-ranking politicians, they won’t shy away from doing the same to us. And the macabre thing is that in doing so, they’ll be doing Shambhala a favour as well.”

Weigert looked out onto the street, then over at Villiger. “Steiner could

have killed me back in Tibet. I…”

“He wanted something else from you back then. But you didn’t grant his wish to have his legends published. You or us...”

Villiger paused, as his thoughts turned to Claudia. He swallowed before continuing.

“We weren’t a threat to him. But now we have a list of the sleeper agents. And we want to take the spear from Agarthi. Do you seriously think they’ll just let us go?”

“They don’t know anything about the

sleeper list.” “And the Spear?”

Weigert stared out onto the street again.

“Would you only go in there if you didn’t expect any resistance?”

Villiger hesitated only briefly before answering.

"No. Claudia is dead. Whatever that spear may be, if it means we can get one over on Agarthi and Shamballa, then we’ll get our hands on it."

He turned into a car park and stopped the car without switching off the engine.

“Right, you can drive now. I need to have a little nap.”

The two swapped places. Weigert got behind the wheel and drove off. Once he had rejoined the motorway traffic,
his friend spoke up.

"That's a silly question, Hans. Let's say we do manage to get hold of the spear. What on earth are we going to do with it then?"

The question was by no means stupid. But Weigert didn’t know the answer. Not yet, at least.

“I don’t know. But this spear seems to be of the utmost importance to Agarthi and Shambhala. That man in the café spoke of the
'Spear of Destiny'.

Maybe we can use it to play with fate.”

Villiger muttered something else that Weigert couldn’t make out. Then his friend’s eyes closed and he fell asleep.

Frankfurt

“Right, and I’ll need a signature here, please.”

The man signed as Karl-Heinz Essinger. It was the same name on which his driving licence was issued. Right next to it, the computer had printed the date and time on the form.

21 December, 4.58 pm.

The employee smiled, revealing two rows of immaculate teeth, the whiteness of which stood in striking contrast to the red of her lips. She pointed to one of the exits.

“You’ll find the car if you go out that way, then immediately to the left. It’s a blue Ford. The number plate is on the form. So you don’t try the wrong one.”

The man reached for the key. “Thank you.”

“Goodbye and have a safe journey.”

“Goodbye.”

It was a lie. She would never see him again. Karl Steiner knew that today would be the last winter solstice of his life. Five days ago, whilst he was still sitting in the solitude of the Tibetan mountains,
his fate had been revealed to him. He hadn’t mourned for a single second.

A human being was nothing compared to the world Steiner served. Not even if that person had made great strides on the path to the Divine. Now it was time to fulfil destiny. The old must pass away, for the new was already looming on the horizon like a silver lining.

Once the power of the spear had been summoned, no one would be able to stop Agarthi. This was his final great task before he would pass from this world into the next forever. Rarely had Steiner felt so free.

Rome

“Seven past five. It’s about time.”

Carlsson paced nervously back and forth, smoking. Beckett sat at the table, lost in thought. Suddenly, one of the telephones buzzed again. The man at that desk had just stood up to fetch cigarettes. Carlsson rushed to the phone and picked it up himself.

“Operations.”

"Target number three has just left the airport again. He picked up a woman who arrived on the TWA flight from New York. Shall we keep an eye on him?"

“Yes, of course. Get back to me as soon as you know where the two of them are heading. Over.”

Beckett had been watching

Carlsson. “And?”

“The man in London hasn’t flown out. He’s just picked someone up from the airport. A woman.”

“Can you find out where the other two are?” Carlsson made two calls.

Then he had the information.

“The one from Munich is now past Würzburg, heading towards Kassel. The other one from Naples is sitting alone in a restaurant in Terracina. That’s about halfway to Rome.”

"Can you show me the route our friend in Munich took on the map?"

“Yes, here.”

Carlsson traced the route with his finger. “So that

would fit?”

“So far, yes.”

“Can we still make it to the castle in time?”

“With the jet and a helicopter from Cologne/Bonn, it might work.”

“Then let your people know. We’re taking off.”

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Wewelsburg

What were a few decades to a structure that had been looking down from the hills onto the surrounding valleys for 400 years? It was as if Wewelsburg had been waiting. Waiting for the disciples of Agarthi to return one day and awaken it from its slumber. Now the time had come.

Hours earlier, a strong north wind had swept the clouds from the sky, leaving it a pristine blue. Only then had the sun sunk below the horizon. The darkness of night had swept across the land from the east, taking it into its embrace.

Yet the longest night of the year would be of short duration today. The rebirth of a new sun would take place in its bosom, a sun that only a few would be able to see, a black

sun that would rise from the mists of time. And the next morning, which would dawn fresh, clear and cold, nothing would be as it was today.

The Spear of Destiny would bring about both creation and death. Its power would breathe the breath of life into the black sun and
usher in a new age. And at the very same moment, its tip would pierce deep into the body of the old age and deal it the deathblow.
As this happened, history would hold its breath, then take a deep breath, change direction and rush towards a new goal in giant strides. And the men of Agarthi would ride upon its shoulders. The hour of decision had come.

"So far, twelve people have gone missing inside the castle, the last one about twenty minutes ago. They entered via a tower located outside the castle courtyard. As far as we can tell so far, the event appears to be taking place largely without security.

We haven't been able to spot any sentries. However, it is quite possible that a welcoming committee for uninvited guests is waiting in the castle's rooms or somewhere in the village. Should we do something
do?"

The intelligence officer pressed the receiver of the mobile phone to his ear to hear more clearly what was being said at the other end of the line. A noise that sounded like the rattling of a
helicopter rotor made it difficult for him to make out Carlsson's words clearly.

"No, under no circumstances. Wait until we get there."

"And what if someone tries to make a getaway in the meantime?"

There was a brief pause on the other end. The incident commander seemed to be consulting with someone.

“In that case, move in immediately. But be careful. We must assume the targets are armed. Should anything
, inform us immediately.” “Understood. When can

you be here?”

“In twenty minutes, I reckon.” “All

right. Over.”

The agent placed the receiver back on the cradle. The second man, who was still sitting in the car, had been listening in. The third was lying a few hundred metres away behind a pile of building materials, watching the entrance to the castle’s north tower, where twelve men had disappeared inside the
walls.

The most senior of the three UN agents reached into the back seat. He pulled the lightweight Kevlar helmet forward and pulled it over his head.

"You stay with the car, Dieter. We’ll keep in touch via the helmet radio. Let me know anything that looks suspicious. John and I’ll keep you updated on the situation at the castle. If anything happens there, pass it on to the incident commander straight away."

"It could get heated today."

"Looks like it. And that’s why we’re going to bring out the heavy artillery."

The two men got out and walked to the boot of their car, which had been carefully parked in the shade of a barn. The man speaking to Dieter opened the boot and handed his boss a belt with two pouches attached. Each contained two full magazines for the submachine guns, which were also in the boot. His boss
strapped the belt around his waist. Then he took out another belt and two submachine guns.

“I’ll bring John his toys. He loves that stuff more than anything anyway.”

"If only that idiot hadn’t forgotten to pack the bulletproof vests and night-vision goggles this morning. I really don’t fancy getting shot. The others are at least a dozen of them, and there are three of us. Quite a mismatch, don’t you think?”

"So what. As far as we’ve observed, none of the men
carrying automatic weapons. Maybe they don’t even have pistols. And besides, the air cavalry’s already on its way.”

The man just shook his head in bewilderment and put on his helmet. He switched on the radio.

“Testing. One, two, three.”

“All right, it’s working. Right, I’m off to John’s now.”

"Don't you want to take a helmet for him as well? What if you have to split up?"

"I can’t carry that much. I’ve already got to lug his weapon and the magazine pouches. I’ll get in touch when I’m with John. That’ll take about five to ten minutes."

“There it is!”

Weigert switched off the engine and let the car roll to a halt at the side of the road. The outline of the castle loomed above the rooftops of the small village. It was more clearly visible than he had expected.

No wonder. The full moon stood in all its glory in the cloudless sky, bathing the landscape in its soft light.

Villiger reached into the glove compartment and took out the two pistols he'd received from Lucentini. He handed one of them to Weigert. Weigert hesitated for a moment before taking it.

"Take it! Think of Claudia!"

Weigert reached for his gun. Both of them chambered a round. A dog howled in the distance. Weigert slipped the pistol into the pocket of his leather jacket.

"It's about 500 metres to the castle. We'd best take the path through the fields past the houses, otherwise we'll run straight into some night owl. Somewhere over there..." – Weigert pointed in the direction – "over there, we need to turn left. Then we'll come straight to the entrance of the north tower."

"Are you sure the tower is the right place? Couldn't they also be in the hall where the black sun is set into the floor?"

"I'm as good as certain they're in the Valhalla. If not, then we'll tackle the hall."

"Sounds good."

Villiger's eyes radiated his determination to avenge Claudia's death. The spear was now the object into which his emotions were focused. With it, he would be able to strike Agarthi and Shamballa the hardest. And that was exactly what he wanted. For Claudia. Peter would not hesitate for a moment to make use of his weapon, thought Weigert, whilst at the same time fervently hoping that his friend would find no reason to do so.

"Well then, let's go."

The two got out and set off, taking care to avoid making any noise. The light of the full moon made it easy for them to find their way. Twelve minutes later, they sank down side by side into the grass. The excitement that had taken hold of them made them oblivious to the cold. They stared intently ahead at the entrance to the castle's north tower.

"It looks pretty quiet."

Villiger had lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Yes, almost too quiet. If the UN Secret Service had found their way here, they would have stormed the castle long ago. So we'll only be dealing with Agarthi."

"If there's anyone there at all. What now?"

"We have to get in."

"I know that too. But how? Do you just want to walk through that gate and greet the gentlemen politely? What if they're armed?"

Weigert lowered his gaze to the ground and looked at a tuft of withered blades of grass sticking out of the earth. He thought for a moment. Villiger interrupted him.

"Are you afraid?"

Weigert hesitated before answering. Then the words came very quietly from his lips.

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

They fell silent. Half a minute passed. Then it was Villiger who spoke up again.

“So be it. What did Egger always say? Once you’ve made up your mind to jump, then jump.”

Weigert remembered the small, wiry instructor with the funny moustache. He’d taught them to fight in the army. Back then, the two friends had seen it all as a bit of fun. But today...

There it lay. The spear of destiny. Laid out on a stone cube right in the centre of the Valhalla, over which the men of Agarthi had spread a strip of velvety, blood-red fabric.

Exactly 50 centimetres and seven millimetres long was the Spear of Destiny, which had once been a simple spearhead mounted on a wooden shaft. Around the year 1000, a blacksmith had chiselled a pointed oval out of the centre of the iron blade and set in its place a nail from the cross to which Jesus Christ had been nailed. In the process, the spear had split in two at the centre.

The blacksmith had then attached several strong copper wires to hold the two parts together. Using further wires, two small knife blades – one on the right, one on the left – had been secured to the lower end of the lance. Several decades later, under Henry IV, a
silver collar had been fitted in the middle. Around 300 years later, under Charles IV of Bohemia, the silver collar had been replaced with one made of gold.

It now bore the inscription ‘LANCEA ET CLAVVS DOMINI’ – Spear and Nail of the Lord. This is what the Spear of Destiny still looked like today.

Once, the Roman legionnaire Longinus had thrust the spear into Jesus' side. Back then, when the blood of the Son of God had stained the metal of the weapon in Jerusalem, the power of the other world had passed into this one. Its focus was the spear, which was to determine the fate of humanity in the future. And so it left its mark on history.

Mauritius, leader of the Theban Legion and a direct descendant of Longinus, held it in his hand as he drew his last breath. 6,666 soldiers had previously paid for their loyalty to their leader and their faith with their lives. The Legion had been ordered by Maximian to crush a Christian uprising. When Mauritius and his men refused to carry out the order and fight against their fellow believers, Maximian decided to make an example of them.

He snatched the spear from the dead Mauritius.

Constantine the Great, who married Maximian's daughter, received the spear as a wedding gift.

Constantine clutched the spear as he rode into battle at the Milvian Bridge near Rome, where it was decided who would rule the Roman Empire in the future.

Attila, the King of the Huns, whose hordes had swept down from the East plundering and murdering as they advanced on Europe, spared the city of Constantinople during his campaign. Yet the price for this was gold and – the Holy Lance. But Attila did not know how to use its power. The conquest of Rome failed. And so he rode up to the city gates and threw the holy weapon at the feet of the Roman officers, saying, "Take it back!"

Charles Martel was guided by the spear when he won his victory over the Arabs at Poitiers. Charlemagne, relying on the power of the
the lance.

Henry the Fowler passed the spear on to the English King Athelstan. When Athelstan's sister Eadgita married Otto the Great, the symbol of power returned to Germany. With its help, Otto secured victory at the Battle of Lechfeld. He passed the Holy Lance on to his son, who in turn bequeathed it to his son, Otto III. After Henry II

and his son and grandson, the spear eventually came into the possession of Frederick Barbarossa.

When he drowned in a Turkish river whilst leading a vast crusader army on the way to Jerusalem, Leopold of Austria took possession of the spear. He brought it back to Palestine, 1000

Years after the spear had left the place where the power of the other world had spilled over into this one, a German order of knights took charge of the shrine. In their wake, the spear was brought from Palestine to Eastern Europe.

However, when the Mongols were ravaging the region during the reign of Frederick II, it was decided to bring the lance back to Germany. There it remained – largely unnoticed – for the next 550 years. The sceptre was now the symbol of the Empire.

In 1806, when Napoleon's troops had overrun most of Europe and defeated the First German Empire, the Holy Lance was hidden in a

tunnel beneath Nuremberg Castle. Yet this location did not seem secure enough. And so it was taken to Vienna, where it passed into the possession of the
House of Habsburg.

On the night of 14 to 15 March 1938, a new man finally seized that symbol in the Vienna Treasury to which he had submitted himself 18 years earlier. Adolf Hitler and the men of Agarthi had seven years in which to use the power of the Spear. On 30 April 1945, fate turned towards Shambhala. Until two nights ago. For now it had returned once more to Wewelsburg.

Twelve stone pedestals were nestled against the walls of the dome-shaped cellar vault. On eleven of them stood the Chosen of Agarthi, lost in a trance. The twelfth pedestal was empty. Karl Steiner would step onto it once he had finished his meditation before the spear. Seconds later
a beam of moonlight would fall through the opening in the wall and bathe the spear in its pale light.

Then the time for Agarthi's rebirth in this world would have come.

"At last!"

The UN agent reached for the submachine gun and the magazine pouches. As he strapped on the belt, the other man knelt behind the pile of planks and peered towards the tower.

Then he adjusted the small microphone on his radio helmet.

"Can you hear me, Dieter?"

The reply came promptly.

"Yes, no problem."

"I'm with John now. Nothing's happening here yet. Over." "All

right, over."

John reloaded the submachine gun. His face reflected the joyful anticipation of an executioner before the execution.

“When are we going in there?”

“Not just yet. A commando unit is on its way here. They’ll arrive in a few minutes. I suppose that’s when it’ll start.”

“Hopefully. I’ve got this…”

John spun round and raised the submachine gun. The barrel was now pointed at the bushes behind them.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

The answer was drowned out by a frenzied staccato of gunfire. The first bullets struck the ground a metre in front of the two men. Then, a fraction of a second later, the volley danced closer.

The last sound John heard was the clatter made by the bullets as they struck the wooden planks. Before that, they had pierced the UN agent’s body. “Let

me go first.”

Hans Weigert was just about to sit up when the cold night air was torn apart by the crack of gunfire. Instinctively, he threw himself to the ground and pressed his face against the earth. His body felt paralysed. He expected to be hit at any moment.

Villiger had rolled over and raised his pistol with both hands. There! About two hundred metres to the right, he saw the bright flicker of muzzle flashes lighting up the night. He aimed at the
spot where it kept flashing. A lump had formed in his throat.

His stomach felt as though ants were crawling around inside it. His heart was beating wildly. He was afraid.

When he finally realised that the gunfire wasn't aimed at him and Weigert, he glanced briefly over at his friend. Weigert
was just turning slowly and cautiously, his body pressed close to the ground. He, too, now had his gun in his hand. The shooting had stopped. It was eerily quiet. Yet the night seemed to be biding its time for another surprise.

"Shit! Where's that coming from!?"

Although Weigert had lowered his voice to a whisper, one could sense the excitement and fear in it.

"From over there."

Villiger pointed his pistol in that direction. "It

wasn't aimed at us."

Weigert let out a deep sigh that expressed both relief and despair.

His thoughts were going round in circles. Now! Now they had to get into the castle! Before the men from Agarthi had vanished into the night again. They must have heard the shots.

Gunshots... The sound of death... Why him, for heaven's sake! ? Weigert would much rather have run away. But then what? His fate lay in there! And nowhere else! If he didn't act now, he never would. He had to fulfil his destiny, and no one would help him. Except Villiger.

"Come on! We've got to get in!

Now!" "Are you mad!?"

Villiger tried to hold Weigert back. But Weigert had already leapt up and was making his way, sheltered by the bushes, towards

north tower. Claudia was dead. And his friend was well on his way to following her. No! He couldn't leave him alone. Not for Agarthi's sake, not for Shambhala's, and not for the spear's either. The only thing,
What mattered at that moment was their friendship. It was now or never! In this battle for their fate, she would have to prove her worth.

As Villiger sprang to his feet, shots rang out again. Yet still, they weren't aimed at the two friends. Where was Weigert? Now he saw him. Twenty metres ahead, he was crouching in the shadow of a bush. Villiger set off running.
Damn it! What was Hans doing now? He could see Weigert straighten up and leap out onto the narrow footpath leading to the tower's entrance. His friend still had ten, perhaps fifteen metres to go.

Then he saw it. A figure stepped out of a recess in the wall beside the gate. Startled, it paused when it spotted Weigert, who was just charging down the path at full speed. Now he too recognised the danger. He threw himself to the ground and rolled onto his side. The figure threw its arms up. In the moonlight, Villiger
recognised the outline of a submachine gun in the moonlight. Any moment now, its deadly contents would be unleashed in Weigert's direction.

Villiger stopped abruptly, crouched slightly and took aim. No thought clouded his instincts. His index finger curled. Once, twice, three times. The figure was thrown backwards, crashed into the heavy wooden door of the tower entrance and slid slowly to the ground. The

submachine gun clattered to the ground. By the time Weigert turned round, Villiger had already set off. He dragged the dead body aside and reached for the weapon the man had been holding just moments before. His friend flung the gate open. The way into the Walhalla was clear.

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“Dieter, come in!”

“What’s going on over there? Who fired the shot!?” “No idea! I’m stuck here! John’s been hit!” As the UN agent blurted out the words, he tried to make out his opponents. They must
There had to be at least two of them. Suddenly there were three loud crashes in quick succession. The tower! He spun round and saw two men running towards the entrance. In front of it, with his back against the door, someone was lying on the ground. Now
he was dragged away.

“Quick, Dieter! Someone’s trying to break into the castle! Notify the incident commander! And then help me! Please!”

The man in the vehicle grabbed the handset of the radio. “Team

Five calling the incident commander!”

It seemed to take an eternity before anyone answered. “This is

the incident commander. What’s going on?”

“Someone is trying to break into the castle right now! Shots are being fired. One of us has been hit. What should we do?”

"Until the targets come out of the castle, nothing at all. We'll be with you shortly.

Over.”

Carlsson looked at Beckett, who was sitting next to him in the

helicopter. “Who could that be?”

Beckett stared at the floor of the helicopter. Then he slowly raised his head.

“Weigert, that bastard! He’s done it.” “Quick!

Downstairs!”

Weigert and Villiger stormed down the stairs into the Walhalla, their weapons at the ready.

Villiger was the first to rush into the vaulted cellar, Weigert following a split second later.

“Hands up! Nobody move!”

Only now did Weigert realise that there were twelve men in the room. Eleven of them were standing on the platforms that ran along the walls. Their gaze was fixed on the centre of the vaulted ceiling. They must have been in a trance. One man was just making his way to the last empty platform. Weigert could only see his back.

“Stop and turn around!”

The man made no attempt whatsoever to comply with the order. Villiger fired into the air.

The bang was deafening, amplified many times over by the vaulted ceiling. No reaction. The man continued on and climbed onto the platform. Only then did he turn around. Weigert was startled, even though he had suspected as much.

“Steiner!”

"I’ve been waiting for you, Mr Weigert."

Weigert leapt into the circular recess, in the centre of which stood the stone cube covered in blood-red velvet, with the spear upon it. He reached for the Holy Lance and raised it high. At that moment, moonlight streamed through the small opening high up in the wall. The beam fell precisely on the spot where the spear had just been lying. It was deathly quiet. Weigert and Steiner's eyes met.

Steiner raised his hand in warning. His face remained impassive.

"And now, Mr Weigert? What do you intend to do with the spear? Your life is measured in years. Agarthi, however, lives forever. Others will come to take fate into their own hands. You cannot
."

"I can, Steiner! I can, because I will!"

Weigert shoved the spear into his jacket pocket. Almost half of it was sticking out.

"Hans! Do you hear that!?"

Villiger had retreated to the entrance of the vault and was listening.

"That sounds like a helicopter! Let's get out of here!"

Weigert backed away slowly, keeping a close eye on Steiner. "Farewell,

Steiner!"

He turned and ran up the narrow spiral staircase. Villiger followed him, covering their retreat with his submachine gun. Once
, Villiger slammed the heavy oak door shut. He grabbed a piece of wood lying on the floor and shoved it into the gap under the door. Weigert looked up.

“There! The helicopter!”

“They’re down there! Come on, down!”

Carlsson bellowed at the pilot. Beckett clung desperately to his seat as the helicopter was abruptly pulled downwards. Carlsson shouted even louder now.

“Open fire!”

A few minutes earlier, the UN agents had opened the sliding doors on either side of the helicopter. One of them had strapped himself into each of the openings. Both men now had their submachine guns at the ready. Whilst the remaining four agents took up their positions so they could jump out of the helicopter as quickly as possible just before it touched down, the men in the open doors opened fire.

Weigert had already run a few steps ahead. Now he turned round and shouted to Villiger.

“Leave the door alone! We’ve got to get out of here!”

His friend was just about to turn round when the first volley struck the castle wall above him. Weigert threw himself to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Villiger drop to the ground too and take cover
a bush. The helicopter was now only ten metres above the ground. In two or three seconds it would touch down.

Beside Weigert, the bullets struck the frozen ground, tearing out clods of earth.

Blinded by rage, he raised his pistol with both hands towards the helicopter and fired.

Five metres away, Villiger had raised his submachine gun to his shoulder and was sitting up slightly.

Just as he was about to bend his index finger, a powerful blow threw him backwards. He rolled over. When he saw the blood on his chest, the realisation suddenly dawned on him: he had fulfilled his destiny.

The man standing by the helicopter's right-hand door yanked the empty magazine out of his gun, simply dropped it, and pulled a new one from his belt. Just as he was about to shove it into the chamber with a jerk, the cockpit windscreen shattered. The man behind it let out a scream and let go of the controls.

Instantly, the helicopter plummeted. A four-metre free fall, then it crashed. The skids snapped apart under the pressure, the fuselage crashed onto the ground and buried the legs of the man who had just been trying to change his gun's magazine.

Beckett crouched dazed in his seat. One of the agents had been thrown out of the open door and had hit the ground at the same time as the helicopter. The pilot hung dead in his seatbelts. The co-pilot was clutching his right leg, blood gushing from his thigh. Carlsson and the other agents had managed to hold on just in time. Now they were jumping out of the machine.

Villiger watched the helicopter crash to the ground. Once more he grabbed the submachine gun, mustered his last reserves of strength and scrambled to his feet. Now the men were jumping out of the damaged helicopter. He stood with his legs apart and fired. The bullets pelted against the helicopter's metal and pierced through it. The men returned fire.

Villiger was hit again – first in the shoulder, then in the leg and finally in the stomach. He collapsed. As his body hit the ground, the helicopter's fuel tank exploded with a thunderous bang. As the flames reached out for Thomas Beckett to

devour his flesh, Peter Villiger took his last breath. His mouth twisted into the hint of a smile. He and Weigert: they had triumphed! He had waited a lifetime for this moment. Then he sought entry into the other world.

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> Austria, 25 December

Winter had gently spread its white blanket over the land. Hidden beneath it, nature gathered new strength so that it might herald its rebirth in full bloom come spring. Until then, however, it lay in a deep slumber. The sky was covered by low-hanging clouds, which had been trying to lighten their load for hours by ceaselessly sending a thick veil of snowflakes down to the earth. The
branches of the fir trees were already bending under the heavy load the sky had placed upon them.

Yet amongst them, amidst the solitude of the woods, stood someone upon whom an even heavier burden had been laid. Hans Weigert gazed out at the smooth surface of the small lake. His damp
hair hung over his forehead, and there were tears in his eyes.

All around, a diffuse light prevailed. It was of the sort one might expect at the very spot marking the transition from one
other. A light that warned the traveller, as if to say: Here is a boundary that can be crossed only by the few. Let the many turn back.

Weigert had three hours of strenuous walking behind him. Through the dark woods, over the steep ridges, to the small lake. It lay in the middle of a hidden valley basin, which offered the pool of water just enough space to be called a ‘lake’ at all.
The tree-covered slopes rose steeply right up to its shore.

There was not a single house here, nor did any road lead to this place. The only way to reach it that did not involve crossing the mountains on foot was a short boat trip. For the small lake was the last in a series of three bodies of water. The first of these was by far the largest. In summer, it was a hive of activity, when tourists filled the many pretty houses to enjoy their holidays and the well-heeled guests, mainly from Vienna, swapped their tailor-made suits for lederhosen.

The second body of water in this trio lay about a 15-minute walk from the first, connected to it by a small river, in whose cold waters one could see the slender bodies of trout darting back and forth in summer. If one strolled along the sandy path, which partly followed the course of the small river, one immediately came upon the only building there: a small wooden house which, in the warmer months, housed a restaurant and a boat hire service.

And from here one could then – across the dark, deep waters – row almost as far as that third body of water, which was the last in the series, separated from the second by only a few hundred metres of land, yet linked to it once more by a little stream
.

Now that winter had settled over the land, the wooden house housing the boat hire was, of course, closed.

And so Weigert had chosen the arduous route over the mountains, like an outcast who crept secretly back to the place of his youth to see if anything had changed. And so it was. For Weigert had been here for the first time at the age of fifteen, together with his father.

It had been a wonderful, carefree time back then. Back when he was still young.

But that was a long time ago.

Weigert carefully settled himself on a fallen tree trunk. His legs ached from the strain of the march. He rested his

elbows on his thighs, rested his head in his hands and stared out at the lake. It hadn't been very cold over the last few days. That was why only a thin layer of ice had formed along the shore, extending no more than a metre or two out into the water. And yet, like the snow all around, it gave the impression of bitter cold.

Claudia was dead. Peter was dead. Hillgruber too. Yesterday, on Christmas Day, he had learnt of the

"Blatt" that his department heads had died. "The car skidded off the snow-covered road, rolled over several times and finally plunged twenty metres down an embankment. Then it burst into flames. Hillgruber could only be recovered dead." This was followed by a long obituary for the distinguished editor of the "Blatt", who had remained loyal to his newspaper for more than two decades.

Now he was no longer alive, and with him had died the only hope Weigert had clung to. The results of his research, the list of Agarthi's sleeper agents, everything he had sent to his head of department, was gone. Either burnt with Hillgruber or in the wrong hands. There was no one who could convince Weigert that Hillgruber's death had been an accident. He had been sacrificed on the altar of the other world just as Peter and Claudia had been.

He, Hans Weigert, was the only one left. The hunt had already begun. It was only by sheer luck that he had managed to get here from Wewelsburg unmolested. But he was under no

. They would get him, tomorrow, in a week, in a month, eventually.

For he possessed something of the utmost importance to his pursuers. He had already come to terms with his life. All that remained now was to bring the final act to a close.

He unzipped his anorak slightly, reached for the waterproof metal box concealed beneath it and pulled it out. Inside were the key to the safe containing the two CDs he'd found at Pierre Martin's, a copy of the research findings he'd written down for Hillgruber – and the spear.

Did this ancient weapon really harbour a secret that was inaccessible to the world in which he, Weigert, still lived? Was there really another world, as Steiner had told him in the Tibetan mountains or the stranger in the Roman café? And did this other world actually determine what happened in Weigert's world? Were Agarthi and Shambhala just a bunch of madmen who had elevated their esotericism to a political maxim?

Garakin, Volker, Greenspan, Martin, his wife, all those who had perished at Wewelsburg, and above all Claudia and Peter: their deaths, at any rate, were a bloody reality. And once they had got hold of Weigert, he would by no means be the last on that list, just as Garakin had probably not been the first. Agarthi and Shamballa, they would live on. Whether in this world or in another. But the Spear of Destiny would vanish forever. Perhaps that could break their power. Or perhaps nothing more than an old piece of metal would vanish with it.

Weigert knew that the bottom of the small lake dropped away steeply just beyond the shore. The water was very deep—far deeper, at any rate, than one might have expected given the size of the body of water. Here, 2,000 years after it had, according to legend, pierced the body of Christ, the spear would find its final, fitting resting place.

Weigert took a run-up and hurled the metal box far out. It cut through the thick snow flurries, spun several times in the air and struck the water. It remained on the surface for a fraction of a second, then sank. And with it, fate sank.

Weigert stared at the spot until the ripples on the water had faded away.

Then he turned and marched off. He had done what he could. Let the hunters find their prey now. They might take his life, but not his secret.

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